

THE CHARGER CHRONICLES
CHARGER THE WEAPON



BOOK 2

CHARGER THE WEAPON

(Charger Chronicles - Book 2)

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Dart speaks to Reader
Chapter 2	Creating a new Eden
Chapter 3	The plumber brothers go to war
Chapter 4	The Tasker massacre
Chapter 5	Charger on Mars
Chapter 6	Charger linked to Taskers
Chapter 7	The Grays invade
Chapter 8	Night of the black rain
Chapter 9	Charger on patrol
Chapter 10	Charger on Neo Terra
Chapter 11	Dart speaks to Reader
Chapter 12	Charger in flames
Chapter 13	The magic city
Chapter 14	Creation of the Prime
Chapter 15	Delaray has a visitor
Chapter 16	Finding the god fragment
Chapter 17	Expedition to Earth
Chapter 18	Preparing for war
Chapter 19	Pennington becomes Pope
Chapter 20	Attacking the Grays
Chapter 21	Charger erupts
Chapter 22	Disaster looming
Chapter 23	Revenge of the god
	Timeline
	Glossary
	About this book

We may go to the moon, but that's not very far. The greatest distance we have to cover still lies within us.

Charles de Gaulle (1890 - 1970)

Chapter 1 Dart speaks to Reader

Are you ready for the second installment of humankind's history, Reader? I hope so because time is growing short. The forces that want to destroy Earth and mankind will be here within a few days. But we at least have time to test your memory on the first one, *Charger the Soldier*. What do you remember about that?

Yes, we're living in the year 4800 CE and I'm one thousand and eighty-three years old. And yes, I'm also the last man to walk the face of Earth. But that wasn't quite what I was looking for.

Oh, you don't like exams? But everyone has to take exams. It's a condition of being civilized. Or maybe a condition of being educated. I really don't remember.

How do I know all this history if I didn't live through it? Charger told me some of it and Charger is my father, so I'm told. The rest I learned from the Tasker and Dinosauroid records.

Now, Reader, I'm supposed to be the one asking the questions. Tell me what you remember from the first installment.

Yes, the alien Gray race landed on Earth millions of years ago and messed with the DNA of both dinosaurs and humans. Though, personally, I wouldn't call it 'messaging.' After all, the Grays were so advanced that, in comparison, humankind looked like worms.

Ha ha! Earthworms. All right, Reader, very clever! And you already know that Charger is going to save you from the forces of evil. But what will happen to me?

Oh, you think Charger will save me because I'm his son. Reader, you don't know Charger!

But let's revisit the 'Earthworms' for a moment. Just imagine going back to cave-man days with a time-lock device, for example, or let's push it a bit and say a Bic lighter from early in the twentieth century. Flick that lighter and produce flame in front of cave people. They'd worship you as a god because you could make flames come out of your hand. The point is, we're so advanced there's no way we could explain to a primitive human what a time-lock device is. And the same applies to us in comparison with the Grays.

That's right! All advanced technology looks like magic when you've never seen anything like it before. Now, tell me about the Mahoud-Earth war.

Yes, it was humans killing humans, as usual, except that Earth people thought Mahoud people were aliens and many of them went on thinking so, even when they learned the Mahouds were human. Yes, very human behavior, trying to bend the facts to fit with their prejudices.

You'd like to see the underground forest cultivated in Somalia by the First Ones? I'm sorry, but that isn't possible. Our limited time is only one reason. You'll learn the other very soon.

Did the spaceship Loki reach planet GHQ179? Eventually. Much later than they expected to.

One last question. What do you think of Charger now?

He's a hero? Not a killing machine?

I will admit that he did what humans told him to do because he wanted to save them. And because he obeyed them, humans soon regarded him as a monster and wanted to destroy him.

Yes, I'm sure if I were treated that way, I'd be angry, too. I can't deny that his solution to most problems is to simply wade in and kill everybody.

Am I glad he's on our side? You bet!

Now, let me tell you what happened to the Mavens who stole the old alien supply ship and escaped into space.

Chapter 2 Creating a new Eden

Elvin and Eve sat on their second-floor balcony, as usual during the evening and discussed the events of the day while their internal video cameras played back a colorful sunset vista of the red dwarf sun slowly disappearing below the horizon. They both still spent long hours on research and organization, but never missed taking that break at the end of the day.

"Things are going so well now," Elvin said, "that sometimes I forget how scared we were – and how ignorant – when we stole that cargo ship."

"I'll never forget, even if it was thirty-five years ago," Eve agreed. "I was terrified."

Along with forty-five of their Maven friends, they had managed to slip aboard the alien transport ship without triggering any alarms. While the others were exploring the rest of the ship, she and Elvin went forward to the bridge. He had looked around, nervously at first but, hearing no alarms, started fiddling with the control panel.

"We need to start this thing and get out of here before they find us," he shouted, desperation underlining every word. He'd banged his fists in frustration on the housing. This random act of violence suddenly sent out a high-pitched frequency, which seemed to emanate from the entire outer surface of the alien craft. Within a few moments, his friend monitoring the base called.

"I can't see any movement on the base now," he'd said. "Absolutely zilch. Maybe that high-pitched tone rendered all the scientists and military personnel unconscious."

Eve had asked, "Was that supposed to happen?"

Elvin said, "God, I don't know. I hope I didn't kill them. Do you remember how that engineer managed to start this thing?"

She moved past her boyfriend and placed her small hand into a slot on the panel. The craft surged to life.

"Okay, great. I will go tell the others we're leaving," Elvin had said, as he moved from the central hub, known as the pit, into the cargo hold. The ship had been the only alien craft captured intact during the Mahoud-Earth war, and a low priority item for the invaders. It was just a simple supply ship, programmed to do just one single task, travel between Earth and a distant planet in the galaxy.

It had been a glorified dump truck, traveling back and forth to the resource planet. The onboard Taskers, biomechanical drones programmed to carry out assigned tasks, piloted the ship, and collected the supplies the aliens needed. But, dump truck or not, it had brought them safely to that same resource planet.

They called the planet New Eden, for it allowed them to escape their servitude to General Harris, who had attempted to create a horrific super-super-soldier by combining DNA from saber-toothed tigers, apes, and humans. The planet felt like an Eden, too, compared to the war-torn Earth they'd left behind. Now they were building their own world, with every intention that it remain peaceful.

She remembered how startled they'd been after lift-off to discover Taskers still aboard the craft. But the drones, with no messages reaching them from the aliens, had remained dormant until some weeks into the trip, when Nigel learned how to activate them.

Eve reached out and took Elvin's hand. "It's been years and I'm still doing this."

"Me too," he said, and squeezed her hand. The pressure sensors in their limbs were finely calibrated and extremely sensitive. "I guess it's part of the pattern, part of being human."

They never regretted coming here, though it hadn't been easy. Their group was brilliant and

privy to everything the scientists knew, since they were an integral part of computer programs designed to understand and deconstruct alien technology. They were all test tube Albert Einsteins, Eve thought. The name the scientists had picked for them, Maven, was apt. And they all agreed that Earth was not the place for them. They had stored food and clothing, oxygen and computers, tools, and other essentials they felt they would need to start life over again, living in peace on a new world.

"We had plenty of problems before we got here, though," Elvin said, apparently following her train of thought.

It had hardly been an epic adventure. Several Mavens died en route; some from disease and some from careless actions. Thus, the journey had turned out to be less of a noble trek to paradise than a typical human ship of fools setting out to take a new land. The travel time had been grossly underestimated, so the journey through space used more of the craft's resources than anticipated. They gained speed by placing the ship in stasis and using drones as a means of increasing resources. But a trip calculated at one year had taken them three to complete and, with no way to control the vessel, supplies were depleted quickly.

"I know," Eve replied, "but it wasn't all bad. We did learn a lot."

They had planned for enough food and water to last the group for at least a year on the new world, which they hoped would be enough time to find edible food. However, three years in space with only a one-year supply of oxygen meant that water had to be used for conversion into breathable air. Their one shining accomplishment on the trip was to learn the methods and technology of the craft they lived in. Nigel made the breakthrough in the fourth month of travel. He figured out how to make the ship create a paste that could be ingested for food. A few days later, the fact that beds were available was discovered by somebody stumbling into a button placed low on a wall. This let a flat surface slide across the floor, creating a bed.

One single room aboard ship was used for waste disposal, and later they discovered it was a source for recycling, as the waste was deconstructed and converted into food and breathable air. The smell the conversion produced was another thing entirely, much like burning truck tires mixed with concrete dust. So it was not surprising, after three years of travel, that the smell of fresh air on the new world made several of the kids vomit. But the air was wonderfully breathable. The sun was a small red dwarf, and strange plants grew in abundance everywhere. It seemed that they had truly discovered an Eden.

Elvin said, "No, it wasn't all bad the first few years, though I still miss some of those guys we lost on the trip."

Only thirty-eight of the original group survived to reach their new home world, but these few were just as determined to make a better world as when they first set out. After a few months, permanent structures had been created by Taskers reprogrammed to new commands. New Taskers were created by taking apart the supply ship for raw materials. The discovery of edible foods and good sources of fresh water aided them in building a town, complete with schools and parks with fountains.

The first fourteen years had been really good. They accomplished much, including having many children, enough to fill that first school.

Then the cicadas hit.

Eve could remember the terror that swept through her friends as billions of the insects emerged from the ground and darkened the sky, filling the air with their shrill crying. They sought trenches where they could lay eggs and find fluid for food. For those purposes, they found human skin every bit as appealing as tree branches.

Some of the Mavens found shelter inside buildings until the onslaught was over, but those who didn't make it into a shelter died. Later research revealed that while trees recovered from cicada attacks, though often scarred, the cicadas carried a bacterium fatal to humans.

Again, it was Nigel who had found an answer. In a brave experiment, he took one of the sick Mavens, a man close to death, and partially conjoined him with one of the Taskers. The Tasker robots were infinitely complex and biomechanical in design, perfect as host bodies for humans to merge with.

The experiment had been a success. Deep in a cave, far from curious eyes, Elvin and Eve watched as Nigel activated the Tasker containing the consciousness of the sick man. He seemed awake and cognizant.

"How do you feel?" Nigel asked.

"You three don't look the way you're supposed to. No wait, it's my vision. I'm seeing things differently. Oh, now I understand. I can see you in the infra-red spectrum, and now in the ultraviolet," Sheldon replied. Only hours before, Sheldon was lying on his death bed, almost comatose, only moments from succumbing to the bacteria infecting his body.

"No, the question I'm asking, Sheldon, is how do you feel?" Nigel repeated.

"I don't feel sick or in pain, if that's what you mean," replied Sheldon as he twisted his new mechanical limbs in several directions, trying to get an understanding of how this new body worked.

"Look, Sheldon, read my lips, how are you feeling?" Nigel spoke slowly.

For a moment Sheldon had no answer, then he realized what Nigel wanted. "I have no feeling. I feel nothing, no sense of touch at all."

"I think he was too far gone to save," Nigel said to Elvin and Eve. "He should be able to feel. The pressure sensors in these mechanoids are quite remarkable."

Elvin sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. The bacteria must have reached his brain."

"But do you think we should proceed with this experiment?" Nigel asked. "We'd have to give up a lot of what it means to be human."

"I don't see that we have much choice." Elvin took Eve's hand. "We'll still have our brains and those are the most important parts of us. Do you agree, Eve?"

She had nodded.

"Start the conversion process," Elvin said. "Those who don't want to be converted will have to be put in stasis for their own safety. And about Sheldon..."

But Sheldon was lifeless and his Tasker body dormant. Nigel flicked a switch on the control panel.

Elvin, Eve, and six of their friends were the first to be given Tasker bodies. The control of existence on New Eden shifted to their hands.

Eve remembered being both fascinated and revolted at being combined with a Tasker. They didn't look like humans, being a mix of alien biology and mechanical constructs, similar to a cross between a spider and a bat. They had multiple limbs for motion and dexterity, mechanical wing structures that operated like a hummingbird's wings, and a head without eyes. They used hearing for guidance, as well as sensors, cameras for sight, and radio frequencies for speech.

The eight original Taskers found in the ship were vibrant blue in color. These eight were redesigned to be merged with the elders of the Maven group. The Taskers made from the supply ship materials, larger and less colorful, were merged with the Mavens most learned in science, medicine, and engineering. The remaining eight Mavens decided to go into stasis and await some other solution to the toxic effects of the cicada bacteria.

On Earth, the Mavens had been bred to fill a role in problem-solving the alien space craft, not in the art of survival. However, the Great Eight, as the eight elders became known, soon realized that their blended bodies were stronger, faster, and better at dealing with everything on their new world.

Eve glanced down at the 'hand' holding Elvin's. Her revulsion had long since evaporated, replaced by a welcome strength and contentment. She might eventually even forget how it felt to have flesh touching flesh in affection.



Years passed and the colony flourished, expanding to cover the planet, roughly the size of Earth's moon. Millions of inhabitants were cloned from the eight Mavens in stasis and were now biomechanical drones answering to the Great Eight. Each city was led by one of the twelve constructs, all loyal and devoted to the betterment of New Eden. The vast resources of this world, so long plundered by the so-called alien invaders of the past, were now plundered again by the brilliant children of Earth.

The tragedy of losing their children to the cicada scourge meant that all hope vanished of a democracy for humans, except for the Great Eight and the twelve constructs. For the Taskers, the biomechanical drones, their life of blind servitude would continue until technology improved enough to provide them with fully competent human brains.

Then everything changed.

One day late in the year 2090, a ship from Earth entered the orbit of this small world and sent a landing party to make contact.

The meeting went badly. The conversion of the Mavens to biomechanical constructs had come with a serious departure from the human form. The lack of eyes and a mouth was the most obvious, but the many limbs were nearly as shocking. Speech between individuals was done through radio frequencies, as the Taskers were never designed to express language. Over time, conversations had evolved into a series of efficient binary bursts of information. No one regretted the loss of eyes because the Tasker form made more efficient use of light through the infrared and ultraviolet bands. But, to the landing party from Earth, the Taskers were completely unrecognizable as human.

As the small landing craft flew over the cities of New Eden, several large Taskers flew up to greet it, forming ranks around the craft and guiding it to the main building of the Great Eight, which was covered with thick, green, ivy-like vegetation. The craft landed in a big open area in front of the building. Many of the city's inhabitants rushed to the site to get a glimpse of these visitors and soon the small craft found itself surrounded by curious onlookers.

The humans remained in the ship for some time, not sure if leaving the vessel was a wise idea. Finally, they decided that since they hadn't been attacked so far, they would venture forth in hopes of discovering what had happened to the kids from Earth.

Three humans in encounter suits left the craft and cautiously walked toward the building, watched closely by the remaining crew members huddled in the main window of the ship. Elvin and Eve came down the long steps from the main building. They were highly decorated and colorful as befitted regal leaders of this new world. The Earth leader began communicating in English to Elvin, asking if the Mavens had landed here in the distant past.

Elvin understood every word spoken to him, but he could not answer any of the questions put to him in a way that the humans could understand. All they heard was a series of clicks as a

response to their questions.

The confusion went on for some time as the small groups faced each other, trying to find ways to communicate. Pictures were shown that Elvin could not see, questions were asked that Elvin could not answer. Body language and math equations were tried, which all led to dead ends. Frustrated, the humans decided to return to the small ship to try to find another way of communicating. Several hours passed before the three re-emerged to try again, this time carrying a blank piece of paper and some colored pencils.

Elvin and Eve had also spent time trying to find a way to communicate and decided that the only way was to wake one of the eight humans in stasis. They chose the best-preserved member of the original group to revive.

Elvin and Eve came to meet with the humans, guiding a confused and bewildered young girl struggling with the effects of many years in suspended animation. Blurry-eyed and groggy, the young girl stumbled forward to meet the three humans in encounter suits. Shocked at what they saw, the three humans began yelling about the discovery of a survivor who had obviously been held prisoner.

When the mother ship broke orbit and headed back to Earth, it carried video footage of the entire encounter. The overwhelmed young girl screamed at the sight of the Taskers and the confused humans opened fire on the Taskers.

The response of the planet's inhabitants to aggression from the small band of humans was immediate and absolute. Footage of the complete destruction of the small landing craft and its crew was transmitted to the mother ship in orbit, and thence back to Earth.

Chapter 3 The plumber brothers go to war

"Wrench it again!" Bill was watching from his comfortable perch on a wooden chair.

Dave threw down the wrench. "Damn alien junk, this shit never works right! Got to go back topside for more tools."

"Kay, I'm just gonna sit here and drink my coffee then, but I'll bet yah one more turn of that nut, and pop, she'll be off," Bill said.

"What the hell would you know? You don't get paid to think, you get paid to do. I'll be back in five." Dave stormed off, back along the dark tunnel that led to the surface and the truck he had parked just outside.

Dave was only thirty-five but looked older. He'd always worked hard to get a few dollars so he could stagger out of a bar late every Friday night. He thought of himself as a lady's man, too, and could not figure out why any lady he started dating usually called it off after a few days.

Grabbing another toolbox from the truck, he lugged it down the tunnel, back to his waiting brother, Bill. As he neared the door, Dave could hear Bill talking to himself.

"You should have listened to Mom. She said be a doctor or an electrician, or a scientist like her and dad, but no, you had to be a plumber." He laughed.

Dave flung the door open, wheezing for breath. "Shut the hell up, you brat. Why I hired you, I will never know." Finding a larger wrench in the toolbox, he fitted it to the nut and pulled hard on it. This resulted in a loud snap as the nut sheared off, and curses flowed like a river from his mouth.

Bill laughed again. "Maybe if those damn aliens took a decent crap like us humans, we never would have gotten into this mess."

Bill had been the kind of kid everyone liked, the total opposite of Dave. He was handsome, funny, and quick-witted, though always unemployed unless his older brother hired him. They had left Earth a few years back, hoping to find good jobs on Neo Terra, the captured, hollow alien world.

After a very long day and several cuts and bruises, Dave and Bill fell into their chairs in front of the television when they got home. They ate instant meals and flipped channels until Dave caught the word 'recruitment' on the news channel.

"This item in again, for those of you just joining us. The president has recalled all military personnel back to their assigned bases for active duty," the blonde newscaster said. Part of the transfer program to Neo Terra had stipulated that service with the military was mandatory and at least ten years of participation was required.

"As if I haven't had enough shit and abuse for one day, now we have to go to the base for more?" Dave snapped.

"Don't sweat it so much, bro, probably just another one of those spontaneous exercises the commanders like to order when they want some attention," Bill said, through a mouth full of food.

"Well, I'm not going till morning. I've had enough for one day. They can wait!" Dave snarled.

Morning came too soon for Dave, but when he finally got up, he found that Bill had already packed a bag for him and prepared a good hot breakfast.

"We're going back to the military. They don't give out raises, and neither do I," grumbled Dave as he sipped his coffee.

Bill grinned. He knew that was his brother's way of saying thanks.

After a short drive in their rattling old truck, they arrived, along with many others, at the gates to their assigned base.

"That's not what I heard," a young freckled-faced kid was saying to his friend. "The Explorers Guild found another world for us to colonize, but it's inhabited by some bug things."

"You're wrong, it wasn't the Explorers Guild, it was some sort of top-secret military group, and they got killed by some bugs from a strange world," another kid said.

"Ah, shit, what are you guys – like twelve?" Dave sneered.

"What the hell's your problem, old man? Fill your diaper?" the pimple-faced kid asked.

Dave dropped him like a stone right there, causing an instant commotion. The base police were quick to act. They put their boots to the mob and hauled Dave and Bill aside, along with a few others.

Over the loudspeakers came a gruff voice. "Good to see you're all ready for a fight. Get these grunts shaved and stacked inside the base. Then we'll see how tough you really are."

After processing, the reservists were formed into ranks on the parade square, shoulder to shoulder, then reformed into battle groups. Finally, as evening closed in, the man who had spoken over the loudspeakers earlier made his way to the podium to address the troops. "My name is Captain Buxton and I'm here to tell you why you've been reassembled." The Captain was a huge man, well over six feet and over two hundred pounds. He bore scars across his heavily creviced face and walked with a slight limp.

"A lot of rumors have been flying around today, but here are the real facts. In June of last year, we received intelligence that the terrorists who stole a cargo ship from military command back on Earth years ago were located on a distant world. A ship was sent but the landing party dispatched to the planet did not return. I have a video to show you, taken from the ship's recorders and transmitted to us, of what happened to that landing party." From behind the captain's podium, a large monitor flared to life and the video began playing.

Bill and Dave found themselves next to the two pimple-faced kids they had had a run-in with earlier that day. Both of them sported cuts and bruises. "I'm Bill. Hope we didn't break too many of your bones," he joked.

"It's all good, old-timer. I'm Foster and this is Jimmy," Foster replied.

From the front of the platoon, Sergeant York turned around and gave them a stern look and a gruff bark. Everyone in the ranks fell silent again.

For about an hour, the large video monitor spelled out the situation. The appearance of the Taskers, which did look like large bugs, sparked an instant reaction from the soldiers. The three dead humans in encounter suits being ripped apart by the bug-like aliens all brought growls of anger. It was difficult to see how the fighting had started, but the camera did get a close-up of a young girl from the original terrorist group which stole the old cargo ship. Her look of terror and confusion had all the soldiers believing the other young kids had been killed by the bug-like aliens, and that this girl was a captive.



"As with some math, there are things that we know are true, but which can never be proven," Sergeant York said to the new friends he'd made. A graduate from MIT, York had never fit into any group, so perhaps it wasn't strange to find his choice of friends were of less than average intelligence, people he could easily control or impress. "Thus, chaos theory is only stable now in

relation to our accumulated human knowledge base to date. As we progress as beings, we will understand new forms of intelligence not yet realized due to our limited development."

"Yup, that's what I was trying ta tell yah, Foster, the big vampires we got on board are from another galaxy," Jimmy said to his bunk mate. Foster looked a bit suspiciously at Jimmy and asked York if he believed the vampires were from another galaxy.

A broad grin formed on York's face. He did not want to let on that he knew more than his new friends. They would not want to be friends with someone as smart as he was. "I was told these Hyborg soldiers are from our own world of Earth, developed in some government lab, though they've been working on Mars the last few years. But the aliens we are heading for have had vast amounts of time to develop principles and understandings beyond our ability to comprehend," York replied.

"So, we are taking mutants from Earth to help fight aliens from time?" Foster asked, sounding dazed.

"I suppose that's one way to look at it," York answered, trying not to smirk. "So, you don't have to fear the mutants. They're on our side."

Feeling a bit safer and less intimidated because of what he had just learned, Foster rose from the table and boldly walked over to Jill to introduce himself. Both Sergeant York and Jimmy stared in horror.

Within seconds, Foster was flat on his back, facing teeth and growls of intense ferocity from both Jill and Mac as they paced wildly around the young man, clawing and scraping at the metal floor. The soldiers scattered back against the walls of the spaceship's mess hall, as panic-stricken shouts arose from all around. Several other Lycans began moving around the room, facing off with soldiers who were now scrambling for anything to use as weapons: spoons, knives, forks, plates, anything they could grab.

Sergeant York lurched forward, his hands outstretched as he tried to reach for his friend Foster cowering on the floor. A large firm hand fell on York's shoulder, pinning him solidly where he stood. An old man's husky voice barked out commands which caused all the Lycans to back off and retreat to one side of the room. The other hand, so large it almost enveloped Foster, picked him up off the floor and handed him to Sergeant York.

"Bad idea to approach a Lycan from behind," the gruff old voice said.

Unnerved, York replied, "Yes, you are very right. I will make sure it never happens again. Thanks for helping Foster."

Shaking uncontrollably, Foster stumbled back to the other humans still guarding their positions along the walls.

York stopped and turned to face the old vampire. "What's your name? I'd like to know who I'm thanking."

It seemed to take forever for the old vampire to answer. In all the battles through all the years, very few had ever asked his name. "Charger!" he barked and moved back to the far side of the room, back to the shadows.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months and months into years, as the soldiers aboard the combat ships traveled through the vast darkness of deep space toward New Eden. The troops were awakened from their stasis chambers at weekly intervals to conserve precious resources. Cryogenic sleep required a lot of power from the ship's engines and became a luxury as crews were rotated in and out of stasis.

A day came when Jimmy was again shaken awake and found that his friends, York and Foster, were already missing from their chambers. He knew they'd be in the cafeteria; they

always went there after waking up.

He found Foster at a table by himself. Sergeant York was across the room, at a table with the old vampire, in a dark corner of the cafeteria. "What are you doing sitting alone?" Jimmy asked Foster.

"I'm not going over there after what happened the last time. Those Lycan things still give me the shakes," replied an uneasy Foster.

Sergeant York came over to their table and sat down. "Okay, his name is not really Charger. Guess that's what he got called the first day he signed up for the experiments. Hard to get any information; the guy doesn't talk much. But he said it had something to do with his car. Also, if you notice, he's the only vampire with two Lycans. Guess that makes him the vampire leader or something."

York did not tell Foster and Jimmy that the vampire had also said something about being good at math. The sergeant didn't quite believe that, but there was no doubt in his mind that Charger was not somebody you wanted to mess with.

Sergeant York pointed at Jill and Mac and said in a low whisper, "Those Lycan things are somehow linked to Charger; you can tell if you watch closely. When I made a few comments about the military and this trip to New Eden, they reacted the same way Charger did. They also seem to look at objects at the same moment and they move in unison sometimes as well. Must be some kind of neural link."

"What kind of link?" asked Foster.

"It's a way of connecting brains together in thought, like computers joined over the internet," York replied.

Suddenly the floor plates shook violently, and alarm bells began ringing all over the ship. The reaction from the men was one of surprise. No one had told them the ships were now slowing their rate of speed in preparation for arrival above New Eden.

Commanders barked orders to troops as crew members were awakened and prepared for disembarkation to the planet below. It had taken three years to get to New Eden and now the soldiers were mere hours away from breathing fresh air. The excitement was nearly palpable as they boarded small transport drop-ships stationed on the massive command battleships. The drop-ships were not pretty, nor aerodynamic in any sense; they were simple boxes. Military personnel were strapped into harnesses in these boxes, and then shot on rails out of the command ships toward the planet.

As the drop-ships plummeted through the atmosphere, motion sickness caused soldiers to begin vomiting. This didn't bother Bill; he just laughed and cheered as his brother Dave stared at him in disgust. Foster rapidly checked his gear while Jimmy continued picking his nose.

The violent shaking and tumbling suddenly stopped when small thruster rockets were fired to stabilize the descent and massive parachutes erupted from the tops of the ships to slow them down. With tremendous thuds, the ships hit the ground. Soldiers, shaken and staggering, poured out of the crafts to take up positions of defense being coordinated by commanders all over the field. Within hours of their arrival in orbit around New Eden, drop-ships containing tanks, soldiers, Hyborgs and command structures dotted the landscape.



Elvin stepped back from the terrace overlooking the city proper and responded in binary language to the Tasker that had rushed into his chamber. "Tell the preceptors not to engage the

humans. We must try to communicate better with them this time. Bring Gerald out of stasis and tell the others to join me at the city gates."

He moved across the room to the chamber where his wife's dead body lay. "They have returned. I knew they would, and I wish you were here to counsel me. I miss you so much, my love." Elvin reached out and, with one of his metal limbs, gently touched his wife's body shell.

Though the Taskers did not normally maintain a military, since they felt no need or desire to dominate anything on their planet, they had managed to create a rather sizeable fighting force after the previous encounter with humans from Earth. Their great capital city, ringed by walls of natural wood, was a paradise of nature and technology combined to create a perfect new Eden. Now, as had happened in ancient fortresses of Earth, Taskers gathered along high points around the walls, looking out at the fields of trees and flowers, watching for approaching humans.

"Gerald, I want you to walk with me to the human camp. We need to try to talk with them to prevent any further hostilities." Elvin communicated through a device that Gerald held in his hand. The unit was a small translating device which the Taskers had developed to convert their binary speech into something understandable by humans. Gerald had been removed from stasis after the first conflict and was instrumental in the development of this technology. It had been decided then that if the humans returned, he would be brought out of sleep again to represent the human face that the Taskers once had, all those many years ago when they first stole the cargo ship and set off to find New Eden.

Leaving behind the ranks of Taskers, Elvin and Gerald set out from the great city to find and talk with the humans from Earth. They soon found a command base, for the humans were as numerous as the flowers surrounding the city. They approached within sight of a large command structure. It seemed wise to let the humans see they meant no harm, so they simply sat down and waited for someone to approach.

Their mistake was in finding the base that Captain Buxton commanded. He was quickly informed of the aliens' approach to their encampment and, gathering up a platoon of troops, he marched out to meet them.

Armored vehicles took up positions around the two aliens of New Eden and guns were drawn and pointed at these two, who waited patiently for someone to approach. After some time, Captain Buxton and an aide moved forward to greet them, as nervous, anxious soldiers looked on. When Captain Buxton and his aide were close enough, Gerald began speaking. "I am called Gerald; we welcome you to New Eden."

"Holy crap, you speak English!" Buxton was alarmed. "How the hell did you learn our language?"

"I was taught English just like you, in school, back on Earth," replied Gerald.

"What the hell do you mean, back on Earth? Were you kidnapped and brought here by the aliens?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. If you wish, we will welcome you and your friends to join us in our city, where all can be explained," responded Gerald.

"What the hell! That's not going to happen. You better start making sense right now, right here, or all hell is going to break loose on your ass!" snapped Buxton, shoving a finger in Gerald's face.

Elvin had understood all that had been said but, as he tried to speak to the confusion, only clicks and sparks emanated from him.

Alarmed at the sounds, Buxton jumped back and drew his weapon, pointing it in Elvin's face.

"Wait, wait, you don't understand, let me explain," tried Gerald, reaching forward to block Captain Buxton's weapon.

The aide perceived this as a hostile act and he too drew a weapon, pointing it at Gerald. Things were spiraling well out of control when the translator began sounding out what Elvin's clicks had meant. 'We were once as you were,' 'We too came from Earth,' 'We took this form to survive.'

"What the hell was that?" demanded Buxton. "Did that damn thing just talk? Did it just say that it took you from Earth to survive? God damn it!"

"Wait, if you would just let me explain," Gerald said, as he raised his communicator up to face Captain Buxton.

This device was perceived as a weapon by the captain's agitated aide, who instantly pulled the trigger of his gun, firing off so many rounds of ammunition at the two Taskers that little was left of them when he stopped.

A few of the rounds fired at Elvin ricocheted off the metal skin of his Tasker body and struck both Buxton and the aide, killing them as well.



This was seen as an incitement to war, and the human engine of chaos began coming to life. Soldiers surged forward en masse as commands were radioed to all units to begin the attack. From the ensuing confusion, troops were formed into workable squads. One of these squads contained humans from the battleship *California*, the plumber brothers, Dave and Bill, along with Foster, Jimmy, and Sergeant York. Added to the squad were Charger, Mac, and Jill. This was the first ever composite group.

Sergeant York began loading his command of thirty troops onto a huge troop carrier for the trip to the main city of the Taskers, some fifteen miles from the drop site.

"Holy crap," Bill said, "we're going to need a trailer for that Charger guy. Did you see how big he is?"

"That's enough nonsense from you," York snapped. "Be glad he's on our side."

"True," Foster added, trying to sound cool.

As the convoys of transports and tanks began rolling, Charger sat uncomfortably on two of the seats with one hand on the back of Mac's neck and one on Jill's.

"Make good and sure you have a hold on them," Dave said to Charger, "I'd hate to have my gun go off in your girl dog's face."

Jill slowly turned to face Dave square on and gracefully leaned forward, her lips curling back to reveal two rows of yellow sharp teeth.

"Keep that up, and she might take your head off your shoulders," was all that Charger said.

The carriers had been thundering through the dense vegetation for only a few minutes when a loud smashing could be heard from the hulls of the transports. The Taskers in the cities had received news of the demise of their leader, Elvin, and of Gerald, and were converging in huge numbers, bearing down hard from all sides on the humans as they tried to advance. Their metal bodies were trying to claw their way into the transports to get revenge on these invaders.

As each transport reached its destination and the main doors swung open to release the troops, the soldiers were met by dozens of frenzied and clicking metal-shelled Taskers ripping and tearing at them. They had been clawing at the transports' metal surface almost the entire trip, and as the soldiers emerged firing their weapons in all directions, many were simply mobbed by

the Taskers and torn to pieces.

Charger was the last to board his transport and so the first to leave it as they arrived, only to be met by several Taskers slashing and hacking. He raised his two large swords high into the air and, with incredible strength, sliced the attacking Taskers in two and left them squirming and sparking on the ground at his feet. Mac and Jill tormented anything they could catch, like two tigers with a rabbit to share.

"Come on, you goons, you want to let the freak vampire and his pets win this war for you?" demanded Sergeant York as he began firing a small hand-held Gatling gun.

The Taskers moved like a horde of ants toward the desperate humans. Every transport that had a vampire and a Lycan on board held their ground. Those with only humans were quickly overrun and, within the first day of combat, over half the fighting force from Earth was eliminated. As light faded to dusk, the Taskers formed into opportunistic attack groups. Only soldiers who had not managed to dig in and find cover were being overrun. The sounds of screaming soldiers and gunfire rang far into the night.

Foxholes were dug all around the transport York's squad had used. Specially designed shape charges exploded onto the ground, leaving a depression the troops could hide in. In one foxhole Bill patched up the scratches Dave had received, with Sergeant York looking out as guard. In another foxhole a few feet away, sat Foster and Jimmy pressed close to each other, unable to decide if the biggest threat was from outside the foxhole, or from inside it, where Mac and Jill groomed themselves like cats. Alone and only half-buried, Charger sat in his own foxhole, scraping bits of Tasker parts off his body armor plating. Their positions had been secured, but their communications had been knocked out, so they had no idea how the other soldiers were faring.

In the morning, York decided it was necessary to find out the situation regarding the others in the command, as well as that of the Taskers. He moved from his foxhole over to Charger's and sat with his feet in the pit that housed the old vampire. "I need information and you'll have to get it. I want you to send one of your pets out to get it for me," he said to Charger. The old vampire heaved his chest for air, then a closed look came across his face. Moments later Jill arrived, belly close to the ground, as though she'd materialized from thin air. York jumped.

She looked at Charger for a few seconds, then a look of fear swept across her delicate, almost human-like face. She looked down at the ground for a moment, until the mental conversation between the two was over. Jill turned and vanished into the dawn. "It's done," Charger said, then went back to repairing his armor and sharpening his swords.

"Good, when can I expect a progress report from you?" asked York as he stood up again. When Charger remained silent, York found himself shifting his feet about like a kid in a school yard at recess. He added, "Okay then, I'll be just over here when you have something."

Jill spent the morning moving undetected around the dead and dying, finding soldiers and vampires dug in all around the areas they had been delivered to. On occasion she would quietly appear next to the vampire in a squad and briefly talk with him about the squad's condition.

It was true that she talked; she had once been human after all. But she was so quiet and shy as to seem almost childlike. Inside, she was still the young girl she had been before the trauma of that day of shooting, a day held hostage to Mac and his rampage. A day best forgotten, but it still haunted her mind for she was never away from Mac for any length of time. Like a puppet on a poison-drenched string, she lived her life excited only by the hunt and the kills in Mac's mind.

She moved effortlessly through the ranks of Taskers, slipping like a shadow in and around the hordes, counting their numbers and assessing their strengths. When she was sure of all she

surveyed, she would return to the few vampires and inform them of her finding, then move on. After a few hours she returned to Charger and relayed all she knew to his mind. Then the quiet, shy little girl moved stealthily over to Jimmy, who was sitting in the foxhole on guard. Pressing her body close to his, she seemed to relax for a moment, as if she felt safe. Jimmy was frozen with fear.

Moments later Mac moved over to Jimmy and, pressing one hand on Jill's neck to hold her to the ground, he struck Jimmy in the chest hard enough to knock the air clean out of his lungs. A fight broke out between the two Lycans, which lasted only a few moments, as once again, Mac had Jill under his thumb.

"Crazy bastards, fuckin' near killed me," Jimmy spat as he gasped for air.

Sergeant York moved back to Charger's foxhole and after a brief conversation, barked an order to his troops. "Pack it up, apes, we move in five!"

For the next five days, the squad, led by Sergeant York, moved all the survivors onto high ground. There they set up a command structure and, since few officers trained in tactics and warfare had survived, it fell to York to lead this army. Defendable perimeters were set in place and observation posts established. All the tanks and troop transports still working were placed throughout the base in defensive positions.

The troops were continually and remorselessly pounded by advancing Tasker patrols. But after five days, they still had their foothold. Sergeant York knew that the Tasker army would have to change tactics or suffer defeat. Their tactics were a conundrum. Like an undisciplined mob on a rampage, they kept throwing themselves into a well-defended military wall. Surely, he thought, they must soon realize that they cannot hope to win if they don't change their method.

After eleven days of relentless charges into the guns of his army, York began to realize that the Taskers didn't know how to change tactics. This was not an army, only a never-ending stream of martyrs. He had to find a way to end it or face running out of supplies.

York wrote in his command log, "Day fifteen on this shit hole, and no end in sight. The enemy seems to be attacking in waves of similar numbers at similar times of the day. I have come to the conclusion that this planet has mobilized all their resources to produce troops to attack our forward positions on a certain time scale." Sipping from a cup of coffee at his small desk, Sergeant York tapped his pen on his bottom lip for a moment, then continued.

"I have been in constant communication with the mother ships in orbit and have tried continuous planetary bombardments of what we think are strategic positions, but with little or no effect. We are getting supply drops more frequently now and this reassures the troops of our survival. However, as Earth is a few years travel from here, our supplies are not without limits." He pushed aside a few papers to make more room to rest his arm.

"Tomorrow, we try a bold new tactic. After the initial attack is defeated, I will order a surge forward by the full camp. If all goes well, we should find ourselves at the gates to the main city complex by tomorrow evening." York put the pen down and stepped outside of the tent. It was time for the expected attack and, like clockwork, it began.



The mob of alien Taskers hit the well-defended camp, and gunfire exploded from all angles, whipping the attackers from the field of combat with relative ease. As the last of the attackers fell, York gave the command to advance, and in one bold surge, the entire camp appeared to miraculously disassemble itself, and race forward. The main gates of the city were suddenly

overrun by commandos and Hyborgs. Taskers of every design and color fled en masse from their homes near the gates and raced for the safety of the large temple complex at the center of the city.

Command and control centers were rapidly set up by the humans, as Sergeant York made his way to the forward observation post to get a good look at the enemy territory. York was as bold as he was intelligent; he could always be found somewhere at the head of his army. Today found him peering through a set of binoculars at the main temple complex, his final objective in this war.

Over the short period of his new command, York had become dependent on the older plumber brother, Dave, to act as an anchor in helping him stay grounded and focused. Dave seemed to have a knack for being the older brother type and was soon promoted to Sergeant York's right-hand man and confidante. The two of them stood in the tower, looking through their binoculars and discussing the next move.

"Well, we got this far with a minimal effort," York said, as he tipped his helmet away to scratch the hair on the back of his neck. "I expect that from now on we can anticipate a never-ending stream of those bugs attacking us."

"Yup, that tends to make good sense, so why the hell did we stop here? We have them on the ropes, we should just finish this before we really start losing personnel," Dave responded. Never one to respect rank, Dave always said what was on his mind.

"There's just something about this fight that seems wrong," York said, replacing the helmet on his head and scratching his arms, then his belly. "Damn, for the last few days I've been itching like an old flea-bitten dog on some hillbilly's porch."

"Well, I didn't want to say anything because for the last few days you've been occupied with this fight, but you probably could use a good shower," Dave said, with one of his rare smiles.

Now scratching his legs, York said, "It's just not right. They don't fight like soldiers, or even like an angry mob. They fight more like drones, like zombies trying to stall us from moving. Shower, you say. I thought that smell was from you."

"So what's next?" Dave asked. "Do we sit here and wait for the inevitable, or do we take the fight to that temple thing? And no, it's definitely you that stinks."

Now the itching had migrated from York's legs to his lower back and eventually to his butt. He stopped for a moment. "First things first. You need a shower; something around here really smells. Think I'll grab a coffee and give this a bit more thought."

The two men left the tower, York striding off to the mess tent for a coffee, and Dave making his way back to York's old squad, which Dave now commanded.

"So, what's the word, bro?" asked Bill. "Are we pressing on?"

Dave sat on a small chunk of cut wood beside his troops as they huddled close around a small fire pit. "Not sure really. York is still puzzling this through."

"Damn, old man," Foster said to Dave. "When was the last time you showered?"

Dave stared blankly at Foster for a moment as Jill quietly appeared behind him and started sniffing. She made a soft cooing sound mixed with a faint purr as she ran her nose up and down Dave's back. Dave, suddenly aware of Jill behind him, jumped up and said to no one in particular, "Damn it, why the hell is she always sneaking up on me?"

Charger stopped sharpening his blades long enough to look up and reply, "Your smell is like ambrosia to her, makes her horny."

The group was silent just for a moment, then everybody exploded in laughter. Even Charger hissed a weird kind of laugh for a few seconds. The sound he made stopped the laughing and the

group stared at him in shock. Then they started laughing again. "Think I'll go grab a quick shower," Dave said.

Meanwhile, a corporal burst into the mess tent and rushed to Sergeant York, who was sitting at a table drinking his coffee and staring at a topographical map on his hand-held computer. "Sir, you need to come see this," the corporal said as he fought to catch his breath.

Moments later found York in the observation tower staring at the entrance to the temple. At the main doors stood a young man alone, dressed in white. A moment later, Dave, soaking wet and half-dressed, raced up to York.

"There, you see, I told you something didn't feel right," York said as he pointed in the direction of the temple. "What the hell do you make of that?"

"Looks like they have a laundry facility, and a damn good one too. That's a really white robe the guy's got on," replied Dave as he peered through the binoculars at the young man standing alone.

"You take two of your best, and only two, and approach him with guns lowered. Find out what he wants. Get that?" York snapped. He finally felt like he was onto the answer he suspected might be out there. Dave jumped to attention.

Why Dave chose Charger and Mac to accompany him was anyone's guess, but the squad he commanded did as they were told without hesitation. As the three of them moved past the forward defensive positions toward the young man in white still standing alone, all eyes were focused on the size differences in these three. Charger and Mac were heads taller than Dave. They ventured forward in an unthreatening, almost Sunday-stroll manner. Here and there, they caught glimpses of faces peering out at them from behind windows and corners, but nothing moved as they approached the young man.

"Hey there, that's a mighty white robe you got on, damn near need sunglasses just to look at you," Dave said as he cautiously approached. "Bet it must be a bitch to find you in the winter, what with all the snow and shit." Dave never expected the young man to speak English, so he thought it made sense to try to talk in a casual manner. "How about those Red Sox, they've had a great year in baseball, you bet."

The young man slowly shifted his gaze from Dave's face to his feet and quietly said. "I don't wear socks; my feet are bare."

Dave was stunned, "Holy shit, you speak English?"

In Dave's ear was a small two-way transmitter, and on the other end was a very excited Sergeant York, trying to ask dozens of intelligent questions all at once. To Dave, each question seemed to use bigger and bigger, more complex words. "I... wait... slow down damn it... I'll get to that in a sec... no... I did... ah, hell," said Dave to the earpiece as the young man wearing white stared in confusion. Dave called Mac over. Mac hesitated, looked at Charger, and then reluctantly moved over to Dave's side. Dave pulled the earpiece from his ear and stuck it in Mac's long and furry pointed ear. He could just make out York saying, "Don't you remove that transmitter, don't, not in Mac, damn it, Dave!"

Mac growled, then sighed, then looked at Charger and whimpered, raising a hand to remove the earpiece. Charger gave Mac a stern look and the Lycan hunched down.

"So you understand English? That's a good start. Can you tell me why you're here?" Dave cautiously asked the young man.

"My name is Nigel. I am one of the group that broke away from Earth. We took the cargo ship and flew here to build a paradise, which you are now destroying. Please stop."

It was like having a conversation with a six-year-old child, Dave thought. The young man

seemed so innocent. "Can you come to our camp and explain this to my commanding officer?" Dave asked as he motioned with his hands in a sweeping direction back toward the military encampment placed at the city gates.

"I will if you stop your hostilities," replied Nigel.

Pulling the earpiece from Mac and cleaning it on his pants, Dave said to Nigel as he placed the transmitter back in his own ear. "I can guarantee that if you accompany me, we will not act aggressively toward your people."

"May I bring our leader to your camp too?" asked Nigel.

"We would be honored," Dave replied.

The small group returned to face a waiting York and his command. Dave and Mac were out front, followed by Nigel and the Tasker leader, who was easily the same size as a heavy battle tank, with Charger bringing up the rear. Cameras were placed all around, sending information up to the orbiting command ships, which then transmitted the results to Earth.

As the Tasker walked, it did not make sounds like metal in motion but instead a soft buzzing. Which, considering its size, was quite remarkable. This particular Tasker was far bigger than any the command had faced before and lacked the large wings they usually sported. The coloring was also very different. Instead of bright, vibrant blues or greens, this one was jet black and, as it walked past the troops and cameras, seemed to sway in an almost threatening manner.

To reduce any appearance of hostility, only a small group of soldiers attended the commanders and the Tasker with his aide, Nigel. A large monitor transmitting information to the command ship was set up at the meeting, which went on well into the night. The Tasker, speaking through Nigel's transmitter, described their past and the philosophy behind the decision to occupy this world. There were many bitter words exchanged regarding the loss of so much life, but Sergeant York did an amazing job of preventing the words from escalating into hostility. He was truly the best and brightest mind there that night.

Most of the soldiers and Hyborgs had been placed at key points around the base to ensure the opponents didn't try to attack them during peace talks. Thus, when the blinding flash of light from the center of the camp erupted, followed by a thunderous roar and a destructive shockwave, only a few survived.

In the moments following the destruction, Dave and his squad positioned themselves on the southern perimeter, or basically the back side of the camp. An eternity of confusion passed as soldiers scrambled to regain their senses and tried to determine what had happened. Dead and wounded littered the area everywhere. Then gunfire erupted as soldiers began firing weapons at the countless Taskers bearing down upon their positions.

Bill helped his brother, Dave, back to his feet as Dave began shouting out orders to define a defensive position. In the ensuing chaos, only the Hyborgs seemed unaffected. Mac and Jill could be seen tearing apart advancing Taskers, followed closely by Charger and his flashing weapons of destruction.

There ensued five days of retreating and hiding from the Taskers, five days of patching broken soldiers and gathering troops into a fighting force. Five days of dirt smells, rain, and mud, accompanied by the fear of falling asleep and being killed in the night. Five days of moving away from the main Tasker city, high up into the hills, in an attempt to reach a mother ship deliberately brought to land on the planet to act as a base to hole up in. Five days of hell, and finally the handful of human survivors reached the crashed mother ship thankful for the many Hyborgs that kept them safe.

"We have determined that the black Tasker leader was obviously the bomb that detonated in

camp, killing almost everyone there," the captain of the crashed ship said to Dave, now the highest-ranking surviving soldier. "You have been promoted to full sergeant, if that means anything to you," the captain continued. "When you're ready, we have a video of the meeting, and the events that happened up to the explosion for you to review."

The captain left the medical room where Dave and his squad were being patched up and breathing air recycled through the mother ship's filters to prevent any ill effects from New Eden's atmosphere. They did not have the luxury of time to heal; the Taskers were constantly scratching and tearing at the hull of the ship, hoping to rid this world of the invading humans. So, within hours of their arrival, Dave had a new command of thirty hyborgs and thirteen human soldiers gathered on the flight deck of the ship.

The ship's crew were added to the ranks of Dave's command, bringing the total of humans up to eighty. Cooks, medics, and mechanics, the lot, even members of the command structure were melded into Dave's ranks. They watched as the main monitor revealed what had happened, the words that were exchanged, then the blinding light.

"Well, that's it, you have now all seen what we face: an enemy with no regard for life, an enemy that perceives us as the invaders," the captain of the ship said from the podium next to the monitor. "We have learned that the Mavens from Earth, the ones we built to help in the back engineering of the alien crafts on Earth, are indeed the ones that have colonized this world, they are indeed the group who stole the cargo ship and came here. We are facing our own kind here, a kind that is twisted and full of hate and vengeance toward our forefathers."

"I believe we have no business being here, but that is not for me to decide. Our orders are clear: we take this world, we stop this insanity, and then we try to make amends for our transgressions. We trust in God that we are doing the right thing here, for if there is to be peace, we must bring this fighting to a stop. I cannot believe that any human, Maven or not, would want God's only creation destroyed. We must find those who believe as we do and support them. Or, God willing, destroy all those here who want a world based on some form of communist structure."

The captain stepped down from the podium and retreated into the ready room to make seemingly impossible plans with Dave for the conquest of New Eden.

Chapter 4 The Tasker massacre

"New Eden! It's anything but!" Bill snarled to Foster and Jimmy. "If you ask me, I think we should have just bombed the whole place back to the Stone Age."

"Yeah," Jimmy replied.

"Don't know which big brass dreamed up this battle strategy, but I'm guessing he did it from some office," Bill growled, waving his arms theatrically.

"Hell, yeah," Jimmy said.

"Wow, Jimmy, that time you managed to string two words together," Bill said. "Yeah." Jimmy looked puzzled.

Charger walked over to the group, followed closely by Mac and Jill. As he approached, the three instantly stopped talking and turned to face them. "I always have that effect on people," Charger grumbled.

Sergeant Dave Kent joined the group moments later and Bill asked, "What's the word, bro? Do we stay or do we go?"

"We go," Dave said, his tone serious. "The plan is to carpet bomb a path through the forest all the way to the smaller city to the west. Intelligence figures that's where the command center for the bugs is located. We're going to ride just behind the bombardment as it travels. Go too fast and we get whacked; go too slow and we get mobbed by whatever bugs are still moving."

"That rocks!" Bill laughed. He was in a much better mood now.

"Don't be an ass, Bill," Dave said as he placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "This won't be a cake walk. Both the *Intrepid* and the *Eisenhower* will be bombing blind. Crashing this ship means that the ships still in orbit are working with less than effective digital resolution equipment."

"So, situation normal then?" Bill was still smiling.

Everyone on the ship had been ordered to gather at the center. Barriers had been placed all around in preparation for a bombing from orbit to kill as many Taskers on the outer hull as possible. This would ensure that the soldiers exiting the craft had a fighting chance to move on their chosen target unmolested.

What followed was pure pandemonium. Huge sections of the outer hull were destroyed as excited communication officers relayed information to the orbiting cruisers. Any Tasker within the bombing area was vaporized instantly, as was much of the crashed ship, but the soldiers survived. They emerged unscathed and ready for battle, moving rapidly. The eighty humans rushed to load their gear on transports so they could stay just behind the orbital bombardment now clearing a path to the western city.

After a short while, the Taskers seemed to catch on to what the humans were doing and, as was expected, they flooded the area with their mechanical bodies in a haphazard fashion, trying to block the human advance. This merely led to many thousands of Taskers cramming the path the orbital bombardment was taking. It left only huge craters and broken bodies with scorched vegetation for the troops to bump and rumble over in their transports.

The western city was several miles from the spaceship, and the comments heard from the transport drivers summed up the feelings of most humans in the group. They were mortified at the devastation of so many Taskers, whose bodies covered the area. They were also confused by the tactics these bugs employed.

The Taskers clearly had a vast intellect, capable of developing magnificent cities with a

variety of technologies, but they fought with a hive-like mentality, rather than with a strategic one. The eighty human soldiers moved almost unmolested to the western city as the Taskers fell by the wayside and, after a few hours, they reached the very heart of the small capital. Stopping their transports at the entrance to a large central complex, the human army encircled their vehicles much like the settlers did with covered wagons in the American past when confronted by Indians. Before they could leave the vehicles to assault the building, they spent a few hours firing thousands of rounds at advancing Taskers, as the two orbital cruisers continued heavy bombardment of the city from orbit.

"So did this plan include us having ammunition when we storm this place, or are we supposed to gather sticks from the forest and whittle them into spears?" Bill yelled to Dave over the deafening gun fire.

"Shut it, you brat, we're on this," Dave yelled back, as he fired his guns at another advancing bunch of Taskers.

It took some time before the Taskers dwindled in number and, when things had become more manageable, new orders were given. Twenty Hyborgs and twelve humans blasted the doors to the complex open and poured into the building, leaving the remaining soldiers in the transports to hold the ground.

"Son of a bitch!" said Foster to Jimmy as he entered the building and stared in amazement at the complexity of the interior. "Have you ever seen anything like this, even in the movies?"

"Yup, once. There was this time, back in Oklahoma," Jimmy said, but was suddenly silenced by a slap to the back of his head from Dave as he moved past.

"Shut it, we are here to fight, not sightsee!" Dave snapped.

"Has he become more of an ass, now he has rank, or is it just me?" Foster asked Jimmy quietly.

"Well, I think..." Jimmy's reply was interrupted by a slap to the back of his head from Charger, who was walking past.

Charger scowled and the two of them fell in line immediately.

What greeted the human army as they entered the building was magnificent. Crystal pillars towered in a glistening white room, with vibrant red and blue vertical bands of light emanating from the walls at various points. The ceiling was solid but reflected the stars in space like a gigantic monitor attached to a camera in orbit. There, floating above the planet were the cruisers, clearly visible and firing ordinance down on the surface below. A band of thick yellow smoke about five inches high hung over the floor, parting for the soldiers then rejoining behind them. The room made a distinct humming sound, with distant clicks echoing off the walls at different locations, followed by an odd breathing sound every now and then. The air was heavy and smelled like vinegar, with a noticeable taste of musk. From random points in the room, small objects, like glowing balls of lightning, shot past the soldiers and disappeared into the walls, causing a flurry of bullets.

"Hold your fire!" Dave ordered the nervous humans.

The Hyborgs paid little attention to the perceived threat, instead they seemed almost hypnotized by the room. All but Charger. He leaned down to Dave and placed a large hand on his shoulder, stopping his movement. "Not good!" was all he said, as he motioned to Dave to look more closely at the other Hyborgs. It was true, the other Hyborgs were not moving, and they seemed almost pinned to the spot where they stood, gazing intently at the glittering lights.

"Ah, nuts! You, and you!" Dave snapped to a couple of humans. "Get these Hyborgs out of here! Put them on the line and get me the rest of the humans, pronto!"

This was only the first room they had entered and, vast as it was, the following rooms might prove to be even more of a problem to the Hyborgs, so using humans was the only recourse. Even Charger willingly left the room, though he was less affected than the others. Dave's humans swelled from twelve to twenty. It was all he could do.

They advanced in pairs from the first huge room to a narrow hallway angling downward, keeping a small distance between the pairs. Dave and Bill were in the lead, followed by Foster and Jimmy, who were followed by the other groups.

The second room, at the bottom of the descending hallway, was much different. The ceiling was only five feet above the floor, but the room seemed to go on forever. Seeing the other side was impossible.

"So, which way, bro?" asked Bill.

"How the hell should I know?" Dave replied. He divided his small force into three groups, each taking a different direction, with orders to travel for no more than five minutes in each direction. At that point, they would stop and radio what they could see, if anything, in this vast space. The ceiling looked like the smooth reddish paving stone that one might see on a residential sidewalk. The floor was dirty gray soil.

After exactly five minutes of travel, the groups stopped and started radioing what they saw. Dave's group had traveled straight forward from where they first entered the low room, and could still see no end in sight, even using digital magnification. The other two groups reported the same, and it was decided they would regroup at the entrance to decide the next course of action.

Dave's group met up with the second group, but the third one did not appear. Frantic radio calls elicited no answer and, since there was no sound of gunfire or other chaos, the two groups decided to find the missing soldiers and discover what had happened.

They got their answer quickly. On the gray soil lay soldiers' gear and blood. Panic swept the group. There were no signs of a fight; the soldiers were simply gone.

"Keep it together, people," said Dave firmly. "Circle up. The only way this could happen is from the ground. I want lines of fire here, and here." Dave pointed outward. "We move back to the entrance, but we move slowly, and we stay close. I don't want anybody shooting one of us, so check your fire."

The group moved safely back to the room's entrance without incident. It seemed that large groups were less vulnerable than small ones. "Okay, this time we move with shock blasts leading. I want protective shields set up in front of us," Dave said quietly to the group. "Something is down here, and my guess is it might be the bugs' boss."

Shock blasts were just what they sounded like: a small explosive device that a soldier would throw out ahead of the group. The device would orient itself so that the concussive blast would be downward. The explosion did not leave a crater, but instead sent a wave of energy penetrating deep into the ground, stunning or killing anything below the surface to about twenty feet in depth.

With small blast shields unfolded at the ready, the group began advancing across the room, with Dave leading. "Whatever's down there can't be that big. The tunnel entrance has to limit its size," Dave said confidently.

"Hell, that's good to know! Isn't that good to know?" Bill said to Foster in his usual snarky manner. "I feel better knowing that. I don't know about you, but that info just makes me feel so much safer."

"Shut up, idiot," Dave said. "Sometimes, little brother..." Suddenly a thrown blaster sent a

cloud of choking gray dust into the air and a large blood-red metallic Tasker, similar in size to the Black Tasker seen earlier, rose out of the ground.

"That's not small!" Bill said, as he started firing his weapon at the thing. The group began firing everything they had at this Tasker as it jerked and rolled from the impact of the gun shots. The soldiers moved apart, forming a semicircle and emptying round after round at this blood-red Tasker. It twisted and lashed out, trying to reach one of the group, but the soldiers kept firing and moving around, making it impossible for the shattering mass of metal to reach any vulnerable soldier. Its massive limbs would hit the occasional shield, sending a soldier tumbling backward in the confining space, but the remaining members would lock-step and protect the fallen until balance could be regained.

It took everyone's efforts to kill the red Tasker and to stop its violent thrashing, but finally it lay still.

"Hope that's it!" Bill said.

"This time I agree with you," replied Dave as he punched his brother on the arm. "And I hope this room has only one entrance. I say we blow the whole tunnel and seal this thing in here."

The group responded and, within minutes, charges had been laid the length of the tunnel. The soldiers left the building, and the tunnel was collapsed.

Elvin's dreams of creating the perfect communal society were finally and irrevocably dead.



With the demise of the blood-red Tasker, all hell broke loose. The small group huddling behind the transports fired at the horde of bodies descending upon them from every direction. One by one, the soldiers ran out of ammunition and the job of keeping the raging Taskers at bay now relied on each soldier's ability to fight at close range with knives. The eighty soldiers were soon down to seventy, then sixty, as the waves of Taskers continued undiminished. Although Dave was wounded, he found the strength to organize the fighting in a direction away from the front door of the central complex.

Careful orbital bombardment sent the Taskers into retreat, giving soldiers the opportunity to climb into transports and head south. Racing away from the small city, they hoped to reach an area where a few drop-ships from the orbiting mother ships could land. Their numbers were down to fifty-four. The drop-ships would each contain about twenty fresh fighters, mostly mechanics and cooks, but with ammunition and fresh supplies. Only three of the drop-ships made it to the ground safely. The other four were mobbed by flying Taskers and torn from the skies.

The soldiers in transports arrived at the designated site just as the three remaining drop-ships landed. Everyone quickly restocked weapons and began fighting off the descending Taskers bent on destroying the three drop-ships. Hour after hour the hell raged on, the surrounding area a mockery to life. Humans fell, Hyborgs fell, and all around them, Taskers fell like rain. The fighting raged on well into the night but, as darkness settled in, the number of Taskers dwindled, until finally all was quiet. In the coolness of the night, the barrels of the guns, still glowing red, gave off steam.

It was, amazingly, Jimmy who found the answer.

Badly frightened by the fighting, he had gotten separated from the retreating group, and stumbled around in the surrounding woods, trying to stay out of sight. Crawling on his belly,

Jimmy crested a small rise and saw, in a valley below, Taskers marching out from a tunnel in the side of a cliff face. He watched the steady stream of Taskers leaving the hidden base for some time before he tried to radio the orbiting ships. As night fell around him, his luck turned. One of the ships in orbit was close enough to pick up the faint signal from Jimmy and, in a short time, he had relayed all that he saw. His friends were glad to hear from the radio chatter that Jimmy was still alive and fighting, but were also worried about what to do with the information they now had.

The obvious choice was to bomb the site from orbit, leaving no chance for the Taskers to continue the fight. But because nobody knew how the Taskers would counter the attack, it was decided that an assault on the cave location could be done only by soldiers in the field. In total there were now sixty-four soldiers re-armed and refreshed, safe behind the stable cover of the drop-ships. However, sending these battle-weary troops again into the line of fire was risky.

"I will take half, and only my kind. We will move straight to the cave location. You take the rest to the city complex and tell the bugs to surrender or start running," Charger said to Dave, who had now had his wound bandaged. It was not a question.

"Agreed," replied Dave. Charger never said much, but when he did speak, nobody felt like saying no.

Half the soldiers under Dave's command boarded the three drop-ships and the other half, under Charger's orders, stormed from the encampment in a direct line to where Jimmy was situated. Lifting skyward, the three ships fought their way to the city capital, with soldiers firing at advancing flying bugs from gun ports all along the sides of the ships.

In a short time, they touched down again at the steps to the temple complex in the great city. "Deja vu all over again," Bill said snippily.

All fighting was stopped as the soldiers emerged from the drop-ships and stood at the base of the temple's great stairs. A few minutes later the door of the temple complex opened, and a lone Tasker stepped out to meet the armed troops.

This new Tasker was Shea, last of the Great Eight leaders, with a bright mind but no longer young. She came cautiously down the steps, holding the railings for support.

Shea faced the soldiers and, from her chest, very slowly and carefully, a small arm emerged, holding the transmitting device they had used earlier to try to communicate with the humans. Shea held it out to Dave, who was closest, and from the clicks she made came the words, "With this talk we can."

Dave boldly stepped forward and retrieved the device, but his boldness caused the Tasker in armor to step back. "It's okay, I won't harm you. We do need to talk," Dave said in a soothing manner. He was not sure if the voice from the communicator was female, but it sure seemed that way.

"Why fight you have? We are you like. My love died. We don't understand your needs." Shea said through the translator.

Bill stepped forward and motioned for Dave to give him the communicator. Dave had never been the smart one. He was good at everyday tasks, but Bill was the smart kid in the family. Talking into the translator, Bill asked, "You know we are here from Earth?"

Shea replied, "Yes."

"You know we came for the ones like us, the ones from long ago?" Bill asked.

"Yes," Shea replied.

"You know what happened to the ones like us, from long ago?" Bill tried, in hopes of getting an answer.

There was a long pause, then Shea repeated, "We are you like." This time she motioned for Bill to follow her up the steps to the temple.

Bill lowered his weapon to the ground and, as Dave started to protest, Bill said, "Trust me, bro, I got this." He walked up the long flight of steps to the temple door, following Shea and, at the top landing, was greeted by doors that swung open automatically to reveal the interior.

There was the answer!

In the center of the room was the shell of the cargo ship from Earth.

Bill now understood. "Ah shit!" he said, which apparently did translate to Shea, as she seemed alarmed by the comment. "Wait here, don't move, I got to fix this," Bill said to Shea and motioned for her to stay put. Racing back down the steps, Bill called out to Dave. "Stop them, stop Charger! Tell them to stand down!"

Dave gave the order to stand down. He knew that when his brother was onto something, it was best to trust his judgment.

"They are us; they are us! Don't you get it now? They have been saying they are us, and I don't know how, but these bugs are humans, they are us!" Bill said excitedly, as if he had just deciphered the answer to the meaning of life.

Everyone that heard Bill reveal this truth was shocked and silent as the depth of what had been happening started to sink in. No one fully understood how these bugs could be human, but apparently the war with these Taskers was a war with humanity's understanding of itself.

Charger found it difficult to obey the order to stand down when he received the message from command. He and his vampires and Lycans had been efficiently cutting down all the Taskers emerging from the cave entrance. The small group had dug into a defensive position just shy of the entrance when Jimmy appeared from the tree line.

"Damn good to see you all. We ready to go get these bugs?" Jimmy said, as if he were now in charge.

Charger placed one large hand on Jimmy and pushed him to the ground. "Wait!" Jill moved over to Jimmy. She sniffed and bandaged his wounds, as Mac paced around the two of them anxiously. Jill seemed truly concerned for Jimmy, much as one might care for the well-being of a favorite pet.

On the temple steps, Bill used the communicator to ask Shea, "Can we stop this? Stop the fight?"

"Yes," Shea replied and, with that, all the Taskers stopped attacking, as if linked to one great mind.

Talks of peace went well into the night, as Bill finally mastered the complex ways the Taskers spoke using the translator.

Back at the cave, a lone Tasker emerged to greet Jimmy, Charger, and the small group, which was still awaiting transport, though they had been informed of what was happening with the peace talks. They were invited into the vast cave complex, which contained the machines of differing designs that produced countless numbers of Tasker drones.

The Taskers, naturally, showed no emotion. They were like a button flipped from the "on" to the 'off' position, from fight to peace.

What passed for a smile lit Charger's face. He found the situation most refreshing. And yet poignant. He understood that he hadn't been adapted to be just a super-soldier, just a lethal killing weapon. He'd also been programmed to protect humans. The only problem was that in both wars he'd been helping humans fight other humans.

Even more ironical, soon all of them would be after his hide.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

So, you want to know what people back on Earth thought of the Taskers? Well, they were very relieved that the war was over. Most of the humans who'd gone to New Eden to fight were dead, though the number of dead humans paled beside the number of Taskers destroyed. There may have been a few people who still thought of the Taskers as 'bugs,' but the technology the Taskers shared was so impressive that such people probably thought of them as 'good bugs' rather than 'bad bugs.'

Yes, much good came out of the destruction. Peace brought new technology to Earth, like the fusion particle drive that carried the soldiers and the Tasker envoys back to Earth in spaceships of Tasker design.

Oh, you want to know about the lasers? Of course. The world laser program was the crowning glory of innovative technology gained from collaborating with the Tasker home world. That meant Earth no longer had to fear the possibility of destruction by asteroids. Placed at strategic locations around the globe were powerful lasers that ran on the fusion particle system. These lasers had the power to completely obliterate anything that ventured too close to Earth or her moon.

There was also the free energy, which meant that buildings in cities never needed to be over-built to keep out the cold and every area, no matter how remote, had the ability to provide power.

You're impressed? So were the humans. Advanced knowledge and science reigned and Earth's bond with Neo Terra and New Eden formed a strong chain. Not only was the moon colonized as a space platform, new parts of Mars began to be brought to life. Its mineral resources aided in the creation of super meta-materials and biotechnologies. Humanity finally had a firm foundation upon which to build a utopian society.

Reader, why are you laughing?

Oh, of course. Stupid of me. Utopian societies have never proven workable. Not when they're made up of humans, anyway.

So now where?

Now we're going to see what's happening to Charger, who was ordered back to Mars as soon as the war with New Eden ended.

Chapter 5 Charger on Mars

Ceres was the largest object in the asteroid belt, a ring of broken, rocky planetoids orbiting the sun like a parade of debris between Mars and Jupiter. Ceres was regarded by most scientists of the day as merely a dwarf planet, only some five hundred and eight-seven miles in diameter. The military, with the help of Taskers, established a base on it shortly after the fighting on New Eden ended. They soon discovered that Ceres contained two mysteries. First, one of the bright spots seen by space probes was the metal of an ancient and completely shattered spaceship. Second, the lone pyramid-shaped mountain towering three miles into the sky was not a natural feature but had been constructed.

Questions about the mysteries remained unanswered. However, the micro-planet was an ideal outpost for conducting military exercises and training space-borne soldiers in the combat skills they needed. The authorities decided that these relics of some past civilization were far too ancient to raise any fear of being confronted by real aliens.

After forty-five years, the military decommissioned the base and, for a short time, it became home to cadets. These young men and women maintained the base until costs became prohibitive and the government decided to sell the planet.

There was always money to be made out of the real estate. A small group of people, who shared both wealth and a common religious belief, purchased Ceres and renamed it Meshed, after an ancient Persian city. Meshed quickly grew in population as people of similar beliefs, discontented with the liberal attitudes of Earth authorities, boarded ships en masse to travel to this micro-world.

"I don't understand, father. Why do we have to move?" Melody asked as she pulled hard on her father's arm, trying to prevent the family from boarding the transport to Meshed. The line to the gate was growing shorter and her father replied, "It is not right for a young one, especially a female, to question the wisdom of her father. Hold your tongue, or by Asha, I will have it cut off."

Melody's shoulders slumped and, like a small trailer in tow, she was pulled along into the ship. Sitting with her mother, Melody asked, "Why does father hate me so much?"

"Hush now, child," her mother replied. "We must never question our men. They are and will always be, all-knowing, as it is written in the Cochrane."

Her mother, like Melody, wore a tightly fitting helmet with a black glass plate that revealed only her eyes. With the flick of a switch on the helmet's chin guard, the screen on her mother's helmet cleared momentarily, revealing her face. She smiled at Melody and said, "Behave now, and I will reward you later."

"But I'm not misbehaving," Melody whined.

Melody's older brother, Marcus, reached over and flicked a switch on Melody's helmet chin guard that could only be activated with the correct fingerprint. This turned off the face plate, putting Melody into darkness. On the inside screen she now faced, a cartoon started playing and, for several hours, she watched the familiar propaganda figures of her family's religion. Her favorite character was a small gray cartoon cat, with ridiculously large ears, that won every argument, but only if the cat obeyed all the cartoon world rules.

After several hours, Marcus again pressed the button on Melody's helmet, revealing her eyes, and asked, "You want something to eat? The flight attendants have started bringing food."

Melody adored Marcus. Though he too was restricted in life by rules and regulations, she

knew he genuinely cared for her and made every effort to look after and talk to her.

"Yes, please," Melody replied softly.

Marcus was worried, for soon his little sister would be wed to a man of this new world they were approaching. After all, Melody was almost twelve now and the family could wait no longer. "I do not wish you to be punished, Melon." Melon was Marcus's pet name for her. He rapped his knuckles lightly on her helmet. "But you have to remember that a proper woman never speaks unless spoken to."

The ship docked on Meshed and the surface transports delivered the arrivals to the new homes they had purchased. Melody's people were shocked when they entered their domicile. This was certainly not the grand home they had left behind on Earth, but more like a military barrack. Before Melody could express her discontent at being in a place with no friends, no horses, and no toys, Marcus pressed the button on her helmet, again placing her into darkness.

Soon Melody and Marcus faced their first day at the school they would now attend. The other children who had relocated to Meshed also struggled with life on this new world and, as children often do, found new and creative ways of getting into trouble.

One young girl in Melody's class was different from the other kids and quickly became Melody's new best friend. Elsa had long fiery red hair. In fact, she seemed to be almost all red hair and little else. She was also twelve and soon to be wed to a baker in the new community. Elsa was not required to wear the helmet, for her family's beliefs were different from Melody's. Often Melody wished she could switch families.

"I'm not letting him push me around," Elsa stated forcefully. "Be damned if I ever take orders from such an old geezer."

"But Elsa," Melody pleaded, "we have to listen and do what we are told. If we don't, the screams of the helmet cause great pain." They both hung upside down from the school's playground gym set. Elsa stopped swinging and placed her index finger hard onto the face plate of Melody's helmet, leaving a fingerprint on the glass where her nose was.

"See, that's the problem with you Rungs," Elsa said harshly, using the slang word which was a derogatory term for Melody's people. "You got no backbones, you're like those jellyfish of Earth. How pathetic!"

"I know," Melody said. "Wish I was a Gong like your family, they're so nice."

"Well, what are you waiting for then? Just take the helmet off. Geez, you are such a Rung," Elsa prodded.

"I can't, my dad would find out," Melody replied sadly.

"Well, your loss, I guess. I'm going home for supper, see you tomorrow." Elsa hopped down from the gym set and skipped off toward her home.

As the little redhead disappeared, Melody decided to go home herself, hoping she wouldn't get punished again for playing at the school grounds.

Two months passed and it was graduation day for the girls of Melody's class. They had finished grade six, as required under a law imposed on the planet Meshed by Earth. In order to get the support they needed to continue living on the dwarf planet, they had to agree to some of Earth's demands. After all, as the government of Earth put it, this was the enlightened future. What kind of barbarians would not educate their girl children? Though this opinion was not shared by the government of Meshed, it had to be tolerated.

"I'll miss you, Elsa, after next week. I'm sure my new husband won't let us play together anymore," Melody whispered to her friend as they stood in line, waiting to receive their diplomas.

"Don't worry, I will come visit you when he is not around. I sneak out all the time from my old man and he never finds out," Elsa whispered back. Elsa had been wed to the baker a few weeks prior to graduation and, as everyone who attended the wedding could attest, it was a beautiful event, and the bride was ravishing in her small white dress.

Elsa visited only once after Melody married, a week after the festive event of Melody's big day. Just a month later, Elsa was killed in a terrible vehicle accident.

Melody gave birth to a healthy baby boy before she'd been married a year, and the families perceived this as a good omen, for boys were highly prized in this society. She named the boy Paul, after one of the saints of their religion.

Paul never knew his father well, for the man died when Paul was only ten years old. Paul didn't know that it was his uncle Marcus who killed his father.

It happened one day when Marcus visited his sister's house unexpectedly, "What the hell happened?" gasped Marcus. Quickly Melody tried to put her helmet back on. She had removed it to bandage the damage to her face that her husband had caused. "Did that bastard hit you again? I warned the little prick if he ever touched you again..." Marcus stammered.

"It's okay," pleaded Melody. "It was my fault again. I have to learn to talk less."

"Damn it, *damn it*, it's not okay. I told you that last time, and the time before that!" Marcus shouted, now completely out of control. Melody's husband made the mistake of coming home early that day and Marcus, in a rage, finished him.

Marcus did not marry and, as he grew older, taught Paul to stand up for himself, but never be cruel. He wanted to make sure that Paul grew up strong.



The great new era of peace shone across Earth like fresh morning light, with skies that were such a pure blue, you wanted to lose yourself in them. The air was clear, the trees a vibrant green, and the oceans warm and inviting. The government functioned well, people had jobs, and restaurants served patrons who were happy to be alive. Everything shone with a glow of brilliance and goodness.

But not in the dusty crags and crevices of Mars. There was no such beauty for Charger to enjoy in the year 2151, as he labored to connect the glass panels needed for new quarters being built for humans. His work companion and superior radioed over to him, "Hey, buddy, stop working so hard, you're making me look bad." Marcus had been given this job, thanks to his father, both as a reward and as a punishment.

Meshed had never suited Marcus; he did not understand his own people. His father had insisted that work on Mars would be good for him and help build character. His sister Melody had wept, for she would miss her brother terribly. But she understood Marcus's need to get far away from her father. She just wished she could go, too.

"Come on you big goon! If I have to come over there and find your underwear and give you a wedgie, I will," Marcus radioed again to Charger. He laughed loudly.

"Don't wear underwear," Charger radioed back sternly.

"Whoa, too much information! Now I can't get that picture out of my mind," came the radio chatter from Marcus.

Marcus had been on Mars for only a few weeks, where the standard practice was to pair humans with Hyborgs, but as superiors. Marcus didn't like this way of thinking and made every effort to treat Charger as an equal. Charger seemed to care nothing for Marcus's courtesy.

"Hey, just curious, but how do you fit into the showers?" Marcus radioed again as he drove the skidder toward his partner. It would soon be time to stop work for the day.

"Don't shower!" snapped Charger.

"Okay. Well, that explains the funny odor in the cab of this skidder. I'm almost at your location, so let's knock off for a beer, buddy." Marcus pulled on the controls to stop the skidder before reaching Charger. The Hyborg just kept working. "Hey, buddy, look on the front of the skidder. I painted a DODGE sign on there for you, get it? Dodge, Dodge Charger."

Charger grunted and decided to stop work so he could go back to the shelter. Then he'd no longer have to listen to Marcus.

The skidder, a large Martian work truck used for hauling parts across the planet's surface, creaked and groaned with Charger's weight as he entered the cab. "Must be nice not to have to wear these bulky space suits," Marcus said as Charger sat in the only seat large enough to fit his frame. "Passed gas in it earlier this morning and I swear I can still smell it. Hey, want me to hook you up to my oxygen line so you can get a sniff?" Marcus poked Charger in the ribs.

"Just go!" was the reply he received from Charger.

"You know, I bet deep down inside, you're just a big teddy bear."

Marcus was really pressing his luck today. Charger refused to waste his time being nice. His great hand reached over and, nearly breaking the lever, engaged the throttle, sending the skidder racing off with Marcus fighting the controls. They quickly arrived at the entrance hub for the Mars base, but as Charger tried to exit the craft, he found the door was locked.

"Say please," Marcus whined, then laughed.

It took everything Charger had not to reach over and throttle the man.

But Marcus could read from Charger's expression that he had crossed a line. "Okay, big guy, I was just joshing with you." He quickly unlocked the door. "There's always tomorrow. I will eventually find a way to make friends with you."

Charger grunted as he ripped the communication device from his ear and sent it flying into the lock-up room for the night, then stormed off and disappeared. The other humans in Charger's path parted like water as he thundered down the halls.

The next morning found Marcus waiting at the exit point that led to the skidder, flipping the communication device in his hands as Charger reported for work. "Hey, buddy, I got your earpiece here. Let's plug you in for another day of wildly exciting conversation."

Charger froze. Written on his face was the thought, "Should I bolt or just kill him now?" Marcus could read the expression and, hoping not to get killed, he added, "We have to work together, for how long I can't say, so we might as well make the best of this. Besides, it's not as if you can run away from me across Mars. Oh wait, I guess you could! But I bet you won't, I can tell when someone really likes me."

Charger required little oxygen because he was so near to being physically dead, and it seemed ironic that he expressed his frustration as a long exhalation and a slumping of his shoulders.

Marcus saw this and could not resist. "Buddy, don't be sad, a twelve-hour workday will just fly by if we talk."

Charger growled.

Six hours into the workday, they were called to the dockyard to pick up materials. Their skidder lumbered across the barren surface of Mars until Marcus suddenly stopped the vehicle. "Hey buddy, it's time for lunch. I got a surprise for you today."

It had cost him, but Marcus had managed to get a raw steak brought to the Martian base

from Earth and thought it a good prank to offer it to his beastly friend. "Look what I got." Marcus pulled the steak from his cooler. He had no idea that Hyborgs ate raw meat and required blood as part of their diet. On Mars, however, this was not yet possible, and Charger was, like the other Hyborgs, on bland dietary substitutes.

Marcus dangled the steak out to Charger like a fishhook, and Charger took the bait. Snatching it from Marcus, Charger devoured the steak, leaving traces of blood on his mouth. Then he turned his gaze toward Marcus, trying to decide if the man could be parted from a few pints of blood.

"Wow, is it me, or is this cab really small?" Marcus asked nervously as he looked at his door and wondered if he should unlock it.

They had stopped the skidder on a ridge, just a few miles from the dockyard, and approaching them fast was a Martian twister. These twisters were like those on Earth but moved through the thin Martian air at incredible speeds. The alarms rang out just as the twister hit the skidder, sending it and its two occupants tumbling down the side of the ridge. It smashed into the bottom of the gully, and all went black for both human and Hyborg.

A click, a spark in the darkness, metal twisting and scraping, another flash from a spark, then slowly the back-up lighting cleared away the darkness. Marcus groaned in pain as he tried to push against the metal pinning him in his crushed chair. The blood cleared from his eyes, and he looked over at Charger. "Hey, buddy, you dead over there?"

Charger did not move. Struggling, Marcus picked up a large wrench from the floor and heaved it toward Charger's head. The motion of the wrench, or the air currents it caused, brought Charger out of his stunned state instantly and he caught the wrench in his great hand.

"Hey, neat trick, wish I could get my dog back home to do that!" Marcus couldn't resist saying.

Charger had had enough. His huge fist flashed out but jerked to a stop just inches from Marcus's face. Only then did Charger realize that he too was pinned down in his seat. He thrashed about for a while before giving up.

"Am I to take it that you don't like me?" Marcus pestered.

Charger thrashed about again for a moment, then relaxed.

"So." Marcus rubbed his hands together. "Guess I'm going to be dead like you shortly. My oxygen gauge is reading pretty low." That sentence triggered an unexpected response from Charger.

"A few years back, humans decided they no longer felt safe having Hyborgs and Lycans around. Our commanding officer, General Harris, ordered me and a few others to start eliminating Lycans and Hyborgs. It was my duty to make sure that any damaged or unnecessary members of our kind were eliminated or demolished. My first order was to eliminate my Lycans, which I did immediately. So, because I am now damaged, it is necessary to complete my orders. I must now be demolished."

"Holy shit, man! I didn't think you could talk!" Marcus blurted out. He was even more astonished when Charger continued.

"However, my first orders were to ensure survival of the human race, so before I can eliminate myself, it is necessary for me to save you."

"Wait, so you're saying you have to keep me alive, that you have to obey me? Because you were designed this way?" Marcus asked.

"Yes," Charger responded, as he began wrenching at the metals that bound him.

"Pick your nose," Marcus demanded.

Charger stopped flailing at the metal and turned his blank white eyes on Marcus. "Doesn't work like that, stupid," He returned to the task of removing the metal.

Marcus laughed, the tone a little hysterical. "Hey, put your arms straight out in front of you like the Frankenstein monster in the old black and white movie vids and say, 'Ugh.'"

Charger noticed that Marcus's oxygen was getting dangerously low and redoubled his efforts.

It wasn't in Marcus's nature to be quiet. "What happens when you're the only one left? Who eliminates you?"

"Who do you think is gonna risk trying?" Charger snarled.

Marcus passed out before he could form another question.

Slipping in and out of consciousness, Charger freed himself at the cost of some body armor and enhancements, and packed Marcus over his shoulder to the dockyard base.

When Marcus awoke, he was in a hospital bed, with Charger standing close by. "Typical," Marcus gasped, fighting for air. "You hog all the room in here. Hey buddy, come closer."

Charger did as he asked.

Struggling with every word, Marcus said, "I'm your superior here, you have to obey me, and I command you not to eliminate yourself till I say you can, got that?"

Charger refused to respond; he was designed to take orders. He wasn't designed to like it.



Long days of painful recuperation were tough on Marcus, making him impatient to get out of the hospital. He pushed himself to recover, afraid that time away from work might result in Charger being paired with another worker. He really liked the big goon and felt it was his responsibility to set this slave of humanity free. After all, he owed his very life to Charger. Marcus complained bitterly to the nurses, hoping to force the issue of his release. After much fussing and fighting, the doctors opted for peace and released Marcus back to work.

The company agreed to place Marcus on light duty until he fully recovered. He was to drive a skidder transporting parts needed for the construction site. As Marcus feared, Charger had been assigned to another worker, so he demanded the Hyborg be reassigned to him. The company supervisor thought Marcus insane. Who'd want to be confined inside the cab of a Martian skidder for twelve hours a day with a Hyborg less than two feet from you? However, Marcus wouldn't back down so the company relented, afraid that if he didn't get his wish, he'd file a complaint with the union.

"Morning, buddy, ready for a hard day's work?" Marcus said cheerfully to Charger. "We got assigned Big Bertha as our skidder, she's big on the outside, but oh, so small on the inside. I hope you used deodorant." Marcus laughed and winced from the pain in his broken ribs.

Charger just stared at Marcus, a blank expression in his milky white eyes. But Marcus would take no more chances with Charger's anger issues. They set off across the Martian surface looking for loads of materials to be hauled. Marcus sang as Big Bertha rolled across the dunes of Mars. Charger flinched often, for his hearing was very good. By their lunch break, Marcus had sung some four hundred and three verses of seventy-eight songs, all of them off-key.

The day wore on with Marcus telling Charger about his life, his family, how his kid sister had married a man he disliked, and how adorable his nephew Paul was. Marcus had a firm, disciplinarian father, and a kind, forgiving mother. Marcus told the story of how his family decided to leave Earth and move with other families to Meshed.

Perhaps Charger could no longer stand Marcus's constant blathering, or perhaps he genuinely wanted to add something to the conversation but, out of nowhere, he finally spoke. "My dad ran a gas station on Earth."

That was all Charger said for the entire day. It both shocked and dismayed Marcus and, for several hours, they drove in silence. The day ended well, and Marcus said. "Kay, buddy, see you tomorrow. Don't be late, we got a big day ahead of us, what with all that driving and talking stuff."

Charger simply left Marcus in mid-sentence and disappeared down the hall. Later that night Marcus began wondering where Charger went at night and decided to find out where the Hyborg lived. The next day came and went with Marcus doing all the talking and Charger doing all the suffering, not responding even once. When they parted ways, Charger rushed off down the hall. This time Marcus followed.

Charger was the ultimate soldier; within minutes he lost Marcus. Marcus was sure that Charger knew he was being followed and, undeterred, pulled a small handheld device out of his pocket and activated the tracer he had placed on Charger's armor. Marcus followed the beeping and blinking device right into a broom closet.

"Man, he's good!" thought Marcus. This day was done, but he'd try again tomorrow.

When the next morning arrived, Marcus asked. "Hey, buddy, I lost you at that broom closet. That was pretty smart. Tell me, how did you know I bugged you?" Charger just grunted and went to his seat in the skidder.

By lunchtime, Marcus was frustrated. He had tried talking to the goon, tried being a buddy to the goon, and still seemed no closer to making friends with him. "Tell you what," Marcus said, "I know you have to obey my commands. I will trade you. If you tell me where you go, I promise I won't command you to slap yourself in the face when we get back to base." There was a long moment of silence as Marcus tried in vain to stare down Charger's blank white eyes.

"It doesn't work like that," Charger finally said. "You can't order me to slap myself." That was all he had to offer.

"Come on, man! What is it with you?" Marcus demanded. "I know you can talk. I can do this every day, man, and sooner or later you're going to talk to me!" Marcus had no idea how easily Charger could outlast him.

For nearly two weeks Marcus tried everything. He hid bugs on Charger, and they failed. Cameras in hallways failed. He paid other workers to stand around discreetly and radio Charger's position, and that failed, too.

Finally, the last day of the work week came around and Marcus was desperate. Soon the crews would disperse for a few days vacation before returning to the job site and he still hadn't found out where Charger went at nights. At the end of the shift, as Marcus released Charger from his seat belt, he slipped a tether from his body to Charger's. The two were now locked together and Marcus threatened to swallow the key if Charger did not comply. "I'll do it man, I'm serious, I'll swallow the damn key if you don't tell me where you live!" Laughter and cheers erupted from the other crews that had docked.

Charger showed rage, his muscles twisting and knotting, his face contorting, his body armor enhancements spinning up, preparing for combat. His great hand reached down and pulled Marcus off the floor by the neck, choking him. The other crews scattered for cover. Charger took the tether in his other hand and, winding it around a nearby post, pulled hard, snapping it, and separating the two. He packed Marcus, still gasping for air, into a side room. Charger put him on the floor and released him.

"I have no room," Charger said. "I have no place, here or anywhere. At nights I hunt and kill members of my own kind. It's what I was ordered to do. Apparently, you humans are afraid of us." Charger thus emphasized that he was no longer a member of the human race. "I do not sleep, I do not eat often, and I do not like you."

Marcus was crushed. He had thought he was making progress with Charger, but now he knew that was never going to happen. Having said his piece, Charger left Marcus coughing in the room and thundered off down the hall. Marcus sat there for a while, as other crew members poked their heads in now and then to be sure he was still breathing. *"I hunt and kill members of my own kind."* Marcus ran the words through his mind repeatedly. The whole scenario seemed impossible.

The weekend passed and Marcus's bruised feelings and neck healed. He had thought about what Charger said and decided not to give up on the person who saved his life. He owed Charger that.

Charger was at work on time and waiting as Marcus appeared. "Hey buddy, it's the start of a new week. What say we start off by not belting you into the seat? You don't kill me, and I won't have to hate you for killing me, agreed?"

Charger made no response; he just entered the skidder. Big Bertha jerked across the Martian surface with Marcus singing at the controls. He did not talk all morning.

Right after lunch, Marcus pulled the skidder to the side of a gully and turned his seat around to face Charger. "Okay, so you said last week you're here to kill others of your own kind. Does that mean other Hyborgs?"

Charger sat in silence unmoved.

With a long-drawn-out breath, Marcus tried again. "Who commanded you to do this?"

Charger was still silent.

"Tell you what, blink once for yes and twice for no," Marcus snapped.

Charger finally relented. "Why do you ask me questions?"

"Because that's what friends do, man, they talk. I tell you about me, and you tell me about you. Oh, and you have to tell me how great I am as a friend, too." Marcus grinned. "Just throwing that out there to help, ya know."

Charger refused to say another word, no matter how much Marcus pleaded and prodded. The day ended with no success, but there were still fourteen more workdays before a weekend off. Marcus decided to press on. He looked for Hyborgs in the base records, but there was no indication that any Hyborgs had ever been on the base, and no record of any deaths. There wasn't even a record of Charger being on the base. He truly had no past or presence on Mars.

"Hey, buddy, it's day thirteen; bet you're looking forward to a weekend. I know I am," Marcus said, as he prepped his gear for a day inside the cab with Charger. Charger just entered the skidder, took his seat, and sat patiently. They drove for some time in silence before Marcus spoke again. "I checked with base personnel. They say you're the last Hyborg on this planet. It seems the five other Hyborgs who were here all died in accidents. I guess with your work done, you'll be leaving soon?"

Charger just stared at Marcus with those blank white eyes that only ever reflected Marcus's face back to him.

Marcus pressed on. "So, where do they ship you next?"

"Earth," Charger said.

Marcus waited. He didn't want to scare Charger off from more answers. "Hyborgs there that need killing?" Marcus asked cautiously.

"No," Charger replied.

"Then what?"

"Military experiment."

Marcus was elated. Charger was talking, but he'd have to take it slow or the Hyborg would clam up again. "Military, eh, so what? Like checking to see if your vocabulary still works or something?" *Stupid, so stupid*, Marcus thought, *try to control yourself*. "What kind of experiment?" he added very quietly.

"A re-connection protocol. I'm to be linked to five Taskers," Charger reported in a matter-of-fact way.

"Taskers?" said Marcus, not wanting to end the conversation. "I thought Taskers were alive or something. I heard, during the war, that they were supposed to be smart."

"Not these, they are blanks like me," Charger said.

"Ah, buddy, you're not a blank. I just know that somewhere deep inside that big, ugly, warped skull of yours there's a brain bursting to get out."

They sat in silence for quite some time before Charger finally surprised Marcus by saying, "I had a friend called Dal once, but that was over a hundred years back. I do not like you, but you would make someone a good friend."

They did not speak again. Marcus shipped out a week later, never having achieved his goal of becoming Charger's friend.



Charger was ordered to remain on Mars for an additional three weeks before being relocated to Earth for the Tasker program. He spent the time sitting in a small mechanical room below the main floors of the complex, not moving or sleeping, just waiting. And counting. Sometimes he counted the aliens he'd killed. When the memories galled him, he'd count the seconds as they slid by. When that got boring, he'd set himself a problem in cube root. Numbers were so clean and precise.

He'd been there four days when a sound caught his attention.

A woman's voice screamed in pain. He could hear sounds of violence and men's voices mixed with cruel laughter. Charger did not move; he had no interest in the affairs of humanity. The noise drew nearer but still he didn't move.

Suddenly a woman burst into the mechanical room, obviously in a frantic search for a hiding place. Torn clothing hung from her bloodied and bruised body. She had escaped her rapists momentarily, but Charger could hear them coming closer. Her wild glances darted here and there and finally landed on Charger. She froze at the sight. Charger's gaze rose to meet hers, like a massive beast gazing on its kill from some dark cave where humanity dare not go.

Her hair was straight and thin, she had lost much weight, and her face was gray. The eyes, oh yes, the eyes! She was so afraid of me.

The almost forgotten words flashed through Charger's mind. Words he had spoken long ago, when he was young. The face was different, but the eyes were blue, a blue like no other he had ever seen, blue eyes that he had only ever known once before.

"Beth," Charger hissed, almost a question.

The woman, shaking uncontrollably, realized the monster had called her name. "Did you just say Beth?"

He didn't reply.

"Please, can you help me?" Beth pleaded, fearful to reach out and touch this beast. Charger did not move, and his seeming lack of interest had her panicking even more.

Then Charger saw a necklace hanging around her neck. A necklace representing the solar system, made only once, by Charger's origin, Henry.

Five men, crazed with the desire to continue raping and abusing the woman, rushed into the room. Beth tried to escape by running behind some metal shelving. As the men taunted her and circled, closing in, a great thud moved the air. The only door to the room had slammed shut.

Now the five men were trapped in the room with Charger.

They had no chance of escaping his cauldron of rage. He had not felt hate, or any other strong emotion since his conversion to Hyborg, but this was different. Charger beat the five men into unconsciousness, while they pled for mercy. Then he took the man closest to him and, with great strength and precision, Charger forced the arm of that man through the chest of another man, careful not to destroy any vital organs. He wanted the men to live through what he was doing.

He continued taking the men, one at a time, and forcing their arms through the chests of others. As an arm passed through a chest, Charger would snap the arm, breaking the bones in such a way that the arm could not be retracted.

Beth pleaded with Charger to stop, repulsed by his brutality. The men were alive, badly beaten, and now bound together as one mass of flesh.

Charger walked to the storage locker, took out supplies, and created a bomb which he placed in the center of the writhing mass of men. He set the explosive to trigger if anyone tried to touch them. Beth crouched against the wall, sobbing and begging Charger to stop. Blood poured from a wound on her head as she rapidly weakened.

The beast continued working. As a final touch, Charger drew his sword and a brilliant flash of blue arc light erupted from his blade as the plasma, held firmly in place by a magnetic field, sparked to life. He pressed the blazing hot sword into the testicles of each of the five men, cauterizing the wound as the flesh burned off. Screams filled the room. Beth lost consciousness.

When she came to, Charger held her in his great arms, trying to get her to the medical facility. But Beth was fading fast. "You called my name. Do I know you?" Beth managed to say, unsure if this beast even understood her language.

"I knew Beth, but not you. The Beth I knew was a long time ago," Charger replied. He added, "I made that necklace."

Beth wasn't sure she understood, but replied, "This was my great grandmother's necklace. She gave it to me. She told me that her first love, Henry, made it for her. He was lost in the invasion. He was my great grandfather."

Charger was stunned. He was holding his great granddaughter in his arms. Here he was, a hundred and forty-one years old, and only now did he learn that he'd fathered a child. He broke into a run toward the medical bay. For two weeks Charger never left Beth's side. The medical staff tried to save her, but she eventually succumbed to her wounds.

For these brief few days in a very long life, Charger had been with Beth's great granddaughter. His own great granddaughter. He could feel something changing in his brain, something loosening, something trying to run free. He had begun life believing that humanity was worth saving, but the experience of being a despised weapon in two wars had destroyed that belief. Now new conflict grew and festered in his mind.

Chapter 6 Charger linked to Taskers

"Look, you little shit, if you shock me again with that cable, I'm going to shove it up your backside. Do I make myself clear?" Charger pulled the engineer up off the ground by his lab coat and drew him close. The small man jerked his head 'yes,' shaking in fear of Charger's gleaming white fangs.

It was more than fifty years since the war with the Taskers had ended, but now the science people in the military wanted to try building a new type of soldier. The plan was to hook Charger up mentally to a Tasker battle group, to see if it would be possible for him to control a group of robots the same way he had worked with the Lycans, Mac and Jill. He was to be the meat behind the joystick, linked with five biogenetic Taskers as his drones.

Mac and Jill had been disconnected from his brain years back, when he received the command to kill them. At first, he'd appreciated the peace and quiet, but soon found himself missing their companionship, even if it had been noisy. Now he was curious to see if this experiment would provide him with the same things as the Lycans had.

"If you clowns get this right, will you be trying the technique on humans?" Charger asked the man he had just threatened.

The man gave Charger a wary look. "Yes, but I'm afraid that's a long time off. We still need to discover just how you are able to differentiate yourself from your familiars." He carefully reconnected the computer cables back to the implant surgically placed in the back of Charger's skull.

The engineer made the final connections to his networking system. "All the other Hyborg subjects had just one familiar hooked up to their brains. You are the only subject to ever have two familiars, thus with the possible ability to hold multiple familiars."

"So I'm just a subject to you?" Charger growled.

"Ah," the engineer said nervously, looking around for the nearest exit.

Charger snapped, "Relax, I don't bite in daylight, but after the moon comes out, I make no guarantees, so you'd better speed this up."

This of course had the effect of making the engineer even more nervous as he scuttled about the room hurrying to finish the necessary connections.

"So, these drones you guys built, they have humans inside them?" Charger asked.

Pushing his thick, black-rimmed glasses up his nose, the engineer replied, "Well, sort of. As far as we can tell, though, they're merely clones placed in bio suits, they possess no significant brain waves, no conscious thought. We think that, to you, they will be just blank shells for you to boss around."

"So you created them from your own DNA then?"

The engineer gave him a blank look and Charger grunted. This guy's IQ was so high that ridicule was lost on him.

The engineer signaled to the observers, watching the process through a glass window from the next room, that he was ready to proceed. A voice replied, saying, "Carry on with the test."

"I'm going to start by bringing two Taskers online to your implant, then dial in the other three over a few minutes," the engineer said.

"Go nuts," Charger said.

The experience turned out to be very different from being hooked up to Mac and Jill. When that started, he'd begun by seeing not only them, but also himself through their eyes as they

looked at him. However, this room was dead quiet. There was no mental interaction with the Taskers.

Then a spark of light caught the edge of Charger's vision and, as he turned to look, it was gone. Then it happened again, but from a different location, then again as he tried to see where the light was coming from. The third and fourth Taskers were being brought online and his sense of confusion grew. The light did not seem to be coming from him. As the fifth Tasker was connected, a strange dark red glow filled the room. Charger had a brief impression of himself looking at himself, but the next scene he saw was real, the room where the experiment was taking place. He had a sense that the Taskers were now seeing what he saw, but he was no longer looking through their eyes.

Then what seemed to be a memory popped into Charger's mind. A small girl stared up at him. She asked him why her brother was so sick, and if he was going to die. Charger found himself reassuring her and holding her small body close to his. He began to realize that he was a mother, and the little girl was his daughter.

Then someone was saying that it was possible to implant consciousness inside the Tasker drones, and that this would enable all of them to go on living. Another voice said some of the crew would need to be placed inside cryo-pods, and others would need to be sacrificed. Only the strong could survive. Charger knew it was too late to save his children; the cicadas had already infected them. There was no antidote.

Then Charger was planting vegetables in a garden and, when he looked up from his work, he saw how beautiful the world around him was. He looked down at his hands, but they had been replaced by the claws and clamps of Tasker appendages. He looked up again and understood that this was New Eden, the Tasker home world.

What was going on?

A ship descended from the sky, huge and flaming as it burned through the atmosphere, apparently out of control. It crashed into the surface. Then Charger was in a temple, beautiful in design. He was talking to a soldier, who looked familiar.

The test room around him grew black, as guys in lab coats kept their distance from him, as if he had a plague, or was an enemy. Then the room vanished, and he was working on the controls of a spaceship, trying to understand how to make it function. He had no idea what he was doing, but it was important to make this cargo ship work. The young man next to him was passing him a small handheld computer displaying a note that read, 'I love you.'

Then there was blood everywhere, and Charger's Tasker body was being hit with round after round of enemy gun fire. He tried to retreat, but there seemed no place safe to be. His husband held him tight. No face looked the same as he remembered. They had lived for several years inside these bodies, and now friends and colleagues all looked like Taskers, identical except for color and design.

He was flying like a bird! It felt great!

He was dying; he could feel it. His husband looked at him with a blank metal Tasker face, but there seemed to be a sadness in it. The room grew cold and dark, the light faded from his eyes and suddenly everything around him just seemed to stop.

Then a light. He was enraged, firing his weapon in every direction, trying to stop the advancing army from reaching the center of the city. As if from nowhere, a huge monster appeared. It seemed to be heading straight toward him and, no matter how many times he fired his weapon at it, the shells ricocheted off its armor. A great lumbering beast of a thing, the like of which he'd never seen before.

Long hair flew from its head, its body was covered in spikes and dirt, and it carried two long swords reflecting the sunlight. Then something hit him from the side. He turned to find two wild beasts covered in dirty fur biting and scratching their way through his metal body, tearing it apart. Gritty dirt mixed with his blood as he tried to fight off the two beasts, and then came the last sight.

The huge monster, mouth drooling blood, a look in its eyes of insanity and death, four fangs glinting in the light as the huge swords sliced deep into his armor. Then nothing but darkness.

Memories continued to flood into Charger's mind. How could this be possible from clones? Then he knew. He had relived several years of the memories of others in just a moment of present time.

Quickly he regained control of his own mind and pulled the plug from the back of his head, releasing himself from the networking system that connected him to the five Taskers. In a rage, he lashed out at the room around him.

"You filthy, murdering pricks!" he growled as he smashed through the viewing window that separated the engineering room from the military observers. "You should be running now!"

Desperate with fear, the observers tried to fend off Charger's advance, but it was useless. He grabbed several of the observers and flung them against the walls of the viewing room. Their unconscious bodies crumpled to the floor.

Then the clicking began. From behind him, the Taskers stirred to life, spurred by the memories of that time when humanity was at war with them. The engineer cried out, begging for help as the five Taskers grabbed his limbs and tore him to shreds. Alarms rang out and military boots thumped down the hallway leading to the lab. As the soldiers entered, they faced Charger and five Taskers bent on killing every human they could find.

The red mist cleared from Charger's eyes and his mind filled with confusion. He had a choice to make.

Kill humans to take revenge for what they'd done to the Taskers?

Or save them?

His programming had begun to break, but it was not yet broken. A thread still remained, tying him to humanity and he made the choice.

Time slowed to a crawl and the ticking of a clock in the distance seemed to stretch into infinity. He had to face these five Taskers alone, without Mac and Jill at his side, the fate of humanity again depending on what action he would take.

God, but he hated humans! But he could not kill them. Yet.

Twenty soldiers lost their lives before Charger managed to reconnect his brain with the five Taskers through the computer network. His head hurt with the forced connections, causing his nose to bleed profusely.

With the connection made, the five Taskers froze in place, their attention instantly and fearfully turned on Charger. Two of the Taskers tried to retreat from the mental connection, as if they realized that he was once again in battle with them. The other three went berserk, the rage of engagement now fully operative. He had never fought a Tasker without the aid of the Lycans, and never three Taskers at once. The battle was more painful than he could ever have imagined.

But this battle made no physical demands. He was not engaged in a battle of swords clashing, but a battle of minds, where pain radiated from his brain through his entire being. It was as if someone was driving a burning hot iron rod filled with burs and barbs through his brain, and slowly drawing it in and out.

One of his own memories allowed him to hold on. Her face and her ice-blue eyes seemed to

appear from a fog in the back of his mind, yet as fresh as yesterday.

It wasn't romantic, just a simple picture of their meeting. He was sixteen and working at his dad's gas station. She drove in on a hot summer day looking to fill the tank of her Camaro. A beautiful car with a beautiful girl, and he was instantly in love with both. They chatted about the weather and her car, and she asked, "So, what do you drive?"

He pointed to the old, purple Dodge Charger up on blocks at the side of the gas station and replied, "Someday I'll have her back on the road. She's been rotting for twenty years without someone to love her."

"I know what you mean," she responded. "My dad helped me get this car. He and my uncle rebuilt it last summer."

They talked cars for some time, then talked about having coffee together and maybe a movie, and in the following months they came to love one another deeply. That memory was now the only thing keeping him strong and alive as he faced five Taskers bent on getting their revenge against him.

His body was exhausted and numb from the pain, his nose bled, and tears of blood formed in his eyes. The battle raged on for hours before the soldiers managed to kill a Tasker. Moments later another Tasker dropped. Charger held the others in place as a third Tasker fell, then a fourth. As the last Tasker died and he was being disconnected from the computer terminal, one of the soldiers said. "How the hell did you manage to hold those things frozen long enough for us to get from Fort Bragg to here?"

He passed out before he could answer.

When he awoke strapped to a surgical bed, the restraints biting at his wrists and legs, a strange memory formed in his mind. It was a distant memory, one that was not his, but from the Taskers the engineer had so foolishly said were blank shells.

The Taskers had found something. In their first year on New Eden, a statue was found in a cave. Someone in the past had carved a small object in the shape of a young woman, but she was different from the women of Earth.

At least that was what he thought as the statue became clearer in his mind, but the more he concentrated, the more it began to resemble a human woman. That was impossible. Or was it? The Mavens who first landed on New Eden might have thought the statue was a joke, created by one of their own. But if history was correct, it had to be human, for the Mahouds, the invaders that used Taskers to travel to distant planets for resources to further their war efforts, were originally from Earth.

How many other worlds had the Taskers visited to find resources for the invaders? How many Taskers were still out there? And, when they learned that the Mahouds had been wiped out, how many might come seeking revenge?

"We have a problem," Charger said to a nearby medical officer as his mind began to clear. "I need to speak with whoever is in charge, and soon."

He was brought before a tribunal of the world's leaders, to explain that Taskers might still be a threat to humanity. Everything he relayed was noted, packaged, and then filed away, never to be addressed. The conclusion was that humanity had no proof except the word of a Hyborg who appeared to have an overactive imagination. They would continue to walk towards the dangerous future, with their eyes wide shut.

Chapter 7 The Grays invade

The old man sat down in his favorite chair, the one he'd occupied for thirty years as head of his department. He cleaned his glasses on his shirt tail and drank heavily of the hot coffee in his thermos cup. Tonight seemed like every other he had faced over his career, and he settled back to begin another long stretch of surveying the stars. Peering into the binocular aperture of the mega telescope high on Mount Washington, he decided this would be a good night to observe the southern skies.

He plotted the coordinates on the computer and the gigantic telescope began to swing slowly to the south. It creaked as it moved, a familiar sound that brought happiness, for the man loved searching the night skies for distant truths. The creaking stopped and the old man checked the computer to ensure he had the correct portion of the sky under observation. Satisfied, he turned his attention back to the aperture that gave such a commanding view of the universe. Staring into space, he let the motion of the planets guide the telescope's view finder, and a great sense of peace settled on him.

Hours passed as he watched and occasionally jotted notes in a small book. His coffee had gone cold, and the air was cool by the time the old man decided to call it quits for the night. Then a small twinkle from a dark region of space caught his eye. He slowly tuned the great telescope's eye to focus on that area and strained to see the distant twinkle. It blinked, then blinked again. How odd, the old man thought, that's not right. He checked the computer to see if other observers had noted anything in this area of space.

But there was nothing, and again he peered at the distant twinkle. This time he thought he could make out a second twinkle in the same area as the first, then a third. The old man removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his shirt sleeve, then looked again. Now he could make out four distinct lights in the same area, all blinking. He stared at the lights for some time, noting a fifth light and then a sixth begin blinking. He reached for the phone and dialed a familiar number. A friend answered and the old man asked if he could also see the blinking lights.

A little time passed as the second telescope group swung their great eye to the region of space the old man gave them and, after a bit, the friend on the phone confirmed that eight lights were blinking in that area. Eight? Now the old man set about determining how far these lights were from Earth. The answer was most alarming. He again reached for the phone and called the space administration's main line to speak with a former student. "Hey, Randy, it's Dr. Kim. I've got an anomaly here I want you guys to look at."

"Sure, doc," Randy replied, "give me the numbers." Randy had known Dr. Kim for most of his adult life and knew that if the old man asked for help, he deserved every minute of the time it took.

Over the complaints of several other scientists there that night, Randy moved one of the big lenses to the specified area of space, but what came into view silenced everyone. Twelve blinking lights appeared on computer monitors around the room. "They appear to be traveling around the speed of light and, according to their redshift, are about a year away from reaching us," Randy said to his old friend. "They also appear to be on a direct course to Earth."

Another scientist in attendance pointed out that fifteen distinct lights were now in view. One of the scientists said this seemed reminiscent of the string of meteorites which had impacted Jupiter in the distant past. If this were a similar case, Earth would be looking at an extinction level event.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

That scientist had no idea how right she was. These blinking lights were not objects commonly seen in space, but ships of the Grays entering Earth's region of space as they traveled from theirs.

Oh, very scary, Reader! The Grays had been a civilization for millions of years before humans first discovered fire and they had found a way to use the quantum portals created by an ancient civilization that predated even their own. These unique portals had the ability to bend light and space so as to be invisible to the unaided eye. Drawing on the powers of dark energy, the Grays could enter a portal and, in a short time, emerge at a different point in space.

Is that what the scientists saw in the sky that night? Yes, this time, the point in space where they emerged was near ours. They knew Earth, for they had been here before.

These were the Grays described in the Dinosauroid history, the ones who had traveled here before the extinction event of the KT boundary, the ones who had enslaved the primitive Dinosauroids before they rebelled. The Grays, who had enough technology to behave as gods, were on their way back to Earth.

What did the humans do? They sought advice from the Dinosauroids, who guessed correctly that the beam of light sent from Stonehenge out into space some two hundred and ten years in the past had been seen by the Grays. Now they had come hunting.

Humanity had about a year to build a defense. The military began placing great masses of ships in orbit, ships built with the blending of the three worlds' technologies.

The Dinosauroids' ability to shift time dimensions rendered the human ships invisible, or so it was thought. All available soldiers from New Eden and Neo Terra were sent to Earth, leaving only a skeleton force on the other two planets. The Dinosauroids rallied all their forces, hoping to put an end to this long-time threat.

Earth's lasers were trained toward the incoming Gray fleet, much as the artillery of old had been used. Obviously, these lasers could be fired only a few times before being targeted, making Earth extremely vulnerable because all power plants around the world would shunt power to the laser, leaving the cities in darkness. Though the energy created by the Dinosauroids' element 118 generators was colossal, the power requirements of the world lasers drained all systems fully, leaving no power for rescue crews.

Over the course of the year, a great and powerful armada was built to circle in orbit just beyond the solar system. This was a fleet of hundreds of thousands of ships. Technology had improved tremendously in the past hundred years and now, in 2250, thanks to the Taskers' ability to gather resources and to construct ships at a pace never before needed, the fleet was so massive that, from the Grays' perspective, it was enough to block the view of the solar system.

Yes, Reader, "Wow!" is an appropriate comment. The fleet hung in orbit like a black curtain, protecting everything humanity had fought so hard to build. The human population had just topped two billion, five million of whom were Dinosauroids who had re-occupied their former homeland of old Australia and would fight to the death to put an end to the Gray scourge.

Are the humans going to win? Well, you'll have to wait and see, but think about this: technology always reaches a plateau, then shifts to a higher plateau. For example, when Stone Age science was replaced by Bronze Age science, and so on down to the Technological Age. Humanity was still in the middle of their Technological age, but the Grays had long since moved

to the next stage. This was the Energy Age, or the age of the nonphysical being. The age of pure essence, the age of the quantum continuum, where life exists at all points in time and space, and all knowledge is attained.

Were the Grays a lot smarter than us? A long time ago, a scientist said that if you look at primates and humans, they are 99.3% similar. Yet while primates are swinging from the trees and looking for bananas, humans build wonderful, complicated technology. But the genetic difference between them is less than 1%. So, the Grays need be only 1% smarter than us to have technology and abilities that we don't understand at all.



Crouching down on the cold cement floor, James and Paul hoped they wouldn't be discovered by the Grays. "I don't get it," Paul said. "We've thrown everything we have at these aliens and still they defeat us. We don't seem to have any technology that can even scratch the damn things. If we don't get something going for us soon, all of humanity will be blotted from existence."

The enormous armada surrounding Earth had been obliterated by the Grays as easily as a human might swat a mosquito out of existence.

The old hangar on the airbase was a poor place to hide, for the aliens tended to focus on military targets. James turned on his side and replied, "Yeah, nothing we have is advanced enough." The two boys shivered from the cold and darkness and pulled their clothing tight to try to retain body heat.

"Maybe what we need in this fight is not more technology, but less," Paul said, scratching his head.

"What do you have in mind?" James whispered, as another alien probed the hangar looking for humans.

The Grays had an unusual method for investigating areas that might hide survivors. Several of the small Grays would gather just outside an area they wanted to investigate. Then, as though of one mind, they would storm into the area in a bubble of radiating energy. Any attack on them would immediately be reflected back on the attackers, as from a repulse shield or an anti-gravity wave. The first thought had been to use heavy explosives to lay traps for the Grays to walk into. The result was the obliteration of the building or area being attacked, apparently with no effect on the Grays.

Paul put his finger to his lips, then pointed across the hangar to the shadowy, great gray mass of an aircraft sitting there. The words painted on the side of the old plane were faded but could still be read. *Enola Gay*.

"You have got to be kidding," James said.

"Nope, all our technology has been defeated, so maybe it's time for some old school tactics," Paul said with a broad grin on his face.

"So...what? We fly that old crap up to the big ships and do what? Tickle their bellies? Say, 'boo'?"

"Something like that. I have a plan. We just need to get out of here alive and back to base," Paul responded, keeping his voice low.

It took the two boys several hours to stealth their way back to the main base, an old partially destroyed wastewater treatment plant. The odors of waste being treated seemed to deter the aliens from going in to probe the area. Apparently, they had a sense of smell, too. Paul and James

penetrated deep into the bowels of the old building in search of one special man, Dr. Jenkins, tall, thin, pale, and thought to be well over seventy.

As Paul approached, Dr. Jenkins pulled his frail old body away from the table he had been leaning on and drank from a smeared glass. "What do you want?" Dr. Jenkins demanded rudely. "Don't pester an old man if you don't bring whisky!"

"Doc, that odd machine you were working on last year, does it still function?" Paul asked.

"That old piece of junk I scavenged from the crashed saucer?" Dr. Jenkins asked.

"Yup, that's the one. Did you ever get it working?" Paul said.

"If you mean working backwards, then yes, damn alien crap. I have no idea how they make that shit work right," the doc said, as he gulped from his glass of booze.

"Backwards?" James joined in.

"Yeah, asshole, I said backwards. Got the damn thing turned on and it killed five researchers and flattened the entire complex. The only thing not affected in a five-mile radius by the gravity wave was the shit-box alien device itself." The old doctor's gruff voice sounded both sad and angry.

"So wait, you turned the device on and what? It crushes stuff?" James asked.

"No idiot! That's not what it's supposed to do. It was supposed to lift off, like a rocket engine. Fly like the saucers. But it didn't." The old doctor poked a bony finger hard into James' chest. "Instead of generating a gravity wave to lift the saucer into flight, it did the opposite. The damn thing created a wave that drove everything within five miles into the dirt, like a gigantic foot stomping the building and its people flat as a bug."

"Perfect," Paul said, and flashed a wicked smile. "Can I have it?"

"What the hell you two boys up to?" asked Dr. Jenkins, as he struggled to stand up straight.

"Well, everything we've thrown at these aliens has just bounced off. They can see through our stealth and defeat our best biomechs. Even the Dinosauroid tech is useless against them. So instead of high tech, let's fight with low tech. I say we get that old plane in the hangar flying again. We can load your device on it and fly that thing straight up the ass of those big sky ships the aliens have." Paul was out of breath, sounding excited. "Something that low-tech will not be seen as a threat by the aliens, am I right?"

"What the HE-double-toothpicks have you two idiots been smoking? I've heard some asinine shit from kids before, but that just takes the cake!" Doc Jenkins snarled, as he wiped the whisky from his mouth and dabbed at what had spilled down his front. He was sure these two kids would get everyone on planet Earth killed just by their very presence, and he wanted no part of that. "Look, you boobs, I've told you before..." the old doctor started to slur, and both Paul and James joined in so that they all said together, "Just lay low till these things get aboard their ships and leave."

Doc Jenkins huffed at the way the two boys mocked him.

"Well, they ain't leaving. In fact, they seem fixed on staying," Paul said quickly, not giving the old doc a chance to argue again. "Besides, what's it going to hurt to try? It's our lives we're risking, not yours!"

That just made the old doc fly into a rage, explaining how the attack would draw the wrath of those damn Grays down on the few survivors that were holed up in the building. The yelling went on for some time, until the whisky got the better of him, and he reluctantly agreed to help. It took a few days of planning and work, with the help of many hands, to get the device aboard the *Enola Gay* undetected, get the plane's motors serviced and ready, and to fill her up with fuel. But after a week all was in readiness.

"Okay, we are going to need a pilot to fly this thing into the mother ship to bring it down, but the Grays have the ability to detect our presence, so how do you plan to get close enough to set the device off?" queried James as he rigged detonators for the main switches to fire in sequence.

"I got that covered, too" Paul replied, as he wiped his brow. "Remember the action figures we used to have as kids? The big vampire with two wolf pets? He's a real person."

"What? He is not! You just made that up," snapped James.

"I kid you not, he is real, and my great-uncle Marcus knew him. He is still alive, or sort of alive."

"No way, that would mean he is like two hundred and fifty years old," James blurted out. "Those action figures were from the days of the first alien invasion."

"Yup, I read it from one of the command briefings. The guy's name is Charger, and he's stationed here on Earth," Paul replied. "Command is aware of our plan and hopes to get him here to fly this plane. The Grays can't kill what they can't detect, and an undead vampire is perfect." Paul quietly packed away the last of the tools in the dark confines of the old hangar. "With a bit of luck, we might be able to fly this thing in a week or two."

In just a few days the boys found themselves in Charger's presence. He had been given orders to take this task and sent to the base immediately. Paul and James were awed. Charger was really there, their huge, childhood hero of old, but there were no Lycans with him. "Where's your werewolves?" asked Paul.

Charger just ignored the question, so Paul asked again. This time Charger gave Paul a stern look and moved away from him. The commanders discussed the plans and gave credit for the idea to James and Paul.

With the group refocused on the boys, Paul again asked. "Charger, I don't see your pets. Where are the werewolves?" This time Charger snapped, "Dead. I killed them!"

Paul was crushed. His favorite childhood toy had been Charger, but he really had a thing for Jill; she was hot. With sadness in his voice, Paul asked, quietly and with reverence, "Jill was my favorite toy as a kid, except for you. How did she die?"

Charger seemed frozen in time for a few seconds, then, with a savage look, he answered. "Things die! Forget your toys and grow up!"

Paul dropped the topic. Even James and the base commanders were stunned by the malevolence. As the darkness fell, Charger was geared and guided to the old plane.

"*Enola Gay*, that figures. Stupid humans!" mumbled Charger under his breath as he stared up at the plane's nose. The data needed to fly this old beast was uploaded to his memory from command's computers, as the engineers and mechanics scurried about in the darkness, making last minute checks.

Paul just couldn't let it go, and as the area was clearing of personnel, he approached Charger, who was preparing to board the plane. "I don't know what happened to you, or to Jill, but you three were my heroes when I was younger. I wanted to be like you, to be changed into a vampire. You've always been there to help us fight, and I know you're very old, but I want you to have this." Paul pulled small figures of Jill and Mac from his backpack and handed them up to Charger.

Charger stared at Paul, then at the dolls. Then, in a voice devoid of emotion, he said, "Get out of my face, or I'll break your neck!" He turned and climbed into the plane.

It had been almost a hundred and twenty years since humanity demanded the death of the Lycans, not that long after he'd gone to Mars for the second time. Yet his memories were so

vivid it hardly seemed more than a year since he'd held Jill to his breast and snapped her neck. Years to a vampire, who seemed destined to live forever, felt like days. Like humans, the older he got, the faster the time seemed to pass.

In the darkness, the *Enola Gay* fired back to life. The thunder of the engines shook the ground as the old war bird moved down the tarmac, then gracefully lifted skyward. The commanders, along with Paul and James, could do nothing now but hope. Old Doc Jenkins, who had been quietly working in the background, drunk as usual, piped up and said, "Oh, I like him! I hope he kills the lot of them."

Flying a B-29 Superfortress bomber was almost impossible to do alone and was made even more difficult by the very size of Charger's body. The engineers had had to remove the two front seats and place an old bed mattress on the floor of the pilot's area to fit Charger into the cockpit. They added some basic computer technology to assist him, technology old enough to prevent the Grays from perceiving the plane as a threat. The old aircraft seemed to crawl along in the air as it slowly made its way to the altitude where the alien mother ships hovered. Several small fighters piloted by the Grays passed Charger, but they all ignored him.

Several hours passed while the commanders watched, through telescopes, the aircraft moving closer to the big sky ships. Charger's face appeared on their monitors, but he said little. Some time was spent in observing the craft while the scientists and engineers plotted a course for the attack, and *Enola Gay* plodded through the sky, ever closer to the ships. Three of the big ships were deemed close enough together for the gravity wave to affect all of them, and Charger was given an attack vector to follow. He flew to where the vector began, jammed a piece of wood into the plane's controls and tied them off with ropes. Then he set the alien device to activate and moved to the back of the plane to make his escape.

At the right moment, Charger leapt from *Enola Gay*, sending her on to her destination alone. His descent rockets engaged just shy of him slamming into the ground, bringing him to a rest on a hilltop a few miles from the command center. He gathered himself up, and began the run to Command, trying to place as much distance as possible between himself and the old plane and its cargo before it blew. He didn't get far. When the gravity device was activated, it was almost dead center of the three huge sky ships, surrounded by several smaller attack crafts. What happened next was a sight that would be remembered by Paul and James for as long as they lived.

The *Enola Gay* instantly crumpled from tail to nose into a ball of metal surrounding the gravity device. The three sky ships shuddered, then rapidly moved toward the mass of bent metal. The smaller craft had no time to shudder, they screamed toward the metal mass and crashed hard, blending their technology with what remained of the *Enola Gay*. The three large ships smashed hard into the glowing mass of wreckage, which hung in the sky like a new star, and the whole thing began crumpling into a ball.

Charger paid no attention to the spectacle above his head. He continued to run from the area below it.

A few other alien craft raced to aid the stricken ships, only to find themselves embroiled in the tangled and shrinking metal ball. Paul and James cheered and yelled for more aliens to be foolish enough to rush to the rescue. Even Doc Jenkins put his bottle down and began dancing about like a kid, encouraging the scientists and engineers to join in. The new star hung in the air as straggling alien ships rushed in to help and were drawn into the spider web, crushed to a point of mass in the sky.

Meanwhile Charger puffed along, running toward the command center. When he was within a few miles of the base, the terrain ahead flared up in a brilliant light that burned his skin the

same way daylight did.

The aliens had gone berserk. Almost at once, they understood what was happening, and tracked the event back to its source. There were no screams of pain, no cries of agony, only a brilliant light, then darkness, and what remained was a crater in the ground. No one there escaped to brag of the victory. Nor did nearby targets escape. An ocean vessel sailing just offshore was blotted out in seconds, along with all other life in the area.

Charger stopped and looked back over his shoulder to see the gravity star fade, then begin to fall from the sky. He watched it hit the ground and, because of its dense mass, disappear beneath the surface of the earth.

Again, he felt robbed of a victory. In spite of all his efforts, people were still dying. What was the point of it all? Charger had long since lost most of his ability to feel, and all desire to express feeling. With the death of Mac and Jill, he had lost his final rapport with humanity. He would remember the brave attempt of this small group, though he doubted it would matter. Old and alone, with many memories he didn't want, Charger walked on into the darkness.



Charger was weary, in more ways than one. "I wish I could avoid humans altogether. If there was just someplace I could go to get away from them, maybe I'd find some peace." This mission they had him on now was a fool's errand, and he was sick of watching the people he was supposed to save end up dying.

That last mission had been a joke, too. He'd watched good people die trying to defeat an enemy they had no chance against. He could not believe Command had gotten so desperate as to listen to a couple of stupid kids plan an attack on the Gray base ships, though he was even more surprised when it actually worked.

For a brief moment in humanity's last stand, they had given their all to win one battle. "I liked watching the destruction of the base ships as they formed a mass of light, hanging by their throats in the sky. In my imagination, I could hear the Grays screaming and that made me happy. We got some of our own back."

Afterwards, he'd reported the news of the success and the failure to another base and had become angry again at the hopeful faces of the soldiers there. Now Command was shipping him off to Vesta, some crap rock in the middle of nowhere, full of fun lava pits to keep his ship out of, to get seeds. "What kind of logic runs in the human mind? Or do they have any?"

"I've become an errand boy," Charger continued to complain. "Maybe when I get to this rock, I should just dig in and stay there. Fuck humanity. I can't believe they're still following orders from that bastard, Harris, even after so many years." As this internal dialogue rolled on in Charger's mind, he ignored the scientists and engineers who busied themselves with final preparations to launch the small spacecraft to its destination.

Systems powered on and launch codes activated. As the small craft surged to life, Charger felt the familiar pressure of acceleration on his massive chest. The ship he'd been launched in was a dinosaur, some old space shuttle from a museum.

"Fucking piece of junk! I bet I could float in space faster than this thing travels." To distract himself, he calculated how long it would take to get to Vesta by propelling himself through space using a breaststroke. Maybe the junk ship wasn't such a bad idea. Charger went on grumbling. With Mac and Jill removed from his mind, he had no one to complain to except himself. His mind was a place he had once known well, but after so many years of being linked to the Lycans,

he found it necessary to learn to navigate there all over again.

Vesta was a small, barren asteroid, incredibly cold and hostile to life. Many years back, the military had hidden a base on its surface, constructed to General Harris's specifications. There, for safekeeping, scientists placed the genetic constructs that made up life on Earth. A kind of Ark in space for a rainy day, full of all the plants and animals that lived on Earth, but in a convenient germinal state that required no food, water, or cages.

Charger was now required to get these seeds of Earth and deliver them to Neo Terra for safekeeping, since the Grays had recently been seen inspecting the asteroid. "Better safe than sorry, my ass," Charger raged on. "Why send me to do what a monkey could do? I should be fighting, not delivering shit!"

It was over for Earth and Charger was the only one left who could survive the long trek to Vesta in such a relic of a ship. "No one ever stops to think what it's like to live as long as I have. There's no subject I haven't heard discussed a dozen times. Every year I watch good people die and bad people live."

The scientists and engineers who launched Charger on this mission really admired him, though they were very uncomfortable in his presence. They spoke of how lucky Charger was to be able to deal with so much destruction and still rise to the fight again and again. To show their gratitude, they sneaked rare, expensive packets of coffee on board for Charger to enjoy on his long trip. This expression of gratitude was lost on Charger; he just wandered into the back area of the craft and made a cup of coffee when he wanted it.

The scientists knew that because Charger was so near to death that he did not require a stasis pod. But they wanted to be kind to the monster and were afraid the long trip in space might cause him mental distress. The engineers designed a small device that Charger could plug into, which replicated the stasis experience for his mind.

Two months passed before the small, primitive ship reached Vesta. There it docked as it was programmed to do and woke Charger from stasis. He grumbled at the alarm signal and went out to gather the crates on his list and stow them in the small craft for its final push to Neo Terra. Fifty-seven crates, going for a ride through space and then back into storage.

"Ah, crap!" Charger grumbled, after he'd read his messages and belted himself back into the command seat built to accommodate his great size. "Go here, go there, now the bastards want me to go back to Earth for a look? When will these guys make up their minds?"

Chapter 8 Night of the Black Rain

"Darling, did you remember to take the recyclables to the recyc-gen?" Debbie yelled to her husband, Joshua.

"Yes, dear. I always remember, just like you always tell me to do it," Joshua replied as he quickly scooped up the bag and tip-toed to the front door to drop it into the generator. Then he slipped back into the front room to watch the sports channel.

Now that they were settled in a city that suited their lifestyle, the future looked good for Joshua's family. New Denver was just too technological for their personal values, so they'd chosen a small city in an area once known as Nevada.

Reno was a deeply Christian town, where neighbors knew each other, streets were clean, and lawns were kept tidy by the town's robots. They had no mass transit, like in those techie towns out east and down south. People mostly walked if they needed to go somewhere. Jobs were plentiful, and Joshua worked as a schoolteacher. Each morning he ate breakfast with his wife and two sons, then around nine, retired to his work room and connected to the network to teach history to his students. He played no favorites with his oldest son, who attended his class. Josephus was expected to go to his room and plug in on time, just like every other student.

History was a popular class with most students, for the mistakes of the past were examined in detail. Each student was expected to make written presentations of their views on why the world was so much better off now that humanity understood the spiritual failures of the godless leaders of the past.

Life had become idyllic, clean, and wholesome. Each weekend, Joshua would gather up the family, dressed in their finest attire, and call for a robot transport to take them to the town's church. The Church of Christ was a remarkable building in the dead center of town, the property covering four square miles. Lush gardens and winding pathways took the faithful past the service bots to the center of a grand structure of crystal and silver spires that gleamed brilliantly in the sun.

No composite materials had been used in the construction of this House of God. No indeed, real gold had been bonded to an iron skeleton. Only one church served this well-populated town of almost a half million souls, for there was only one God, and all who lived there were expected to praise His divinity. Though architecturally beautiful, the church was not acoustically well-designed, and it was necessary for the pastor at the podium to use a microphone, hanging discreetly from his right ear, to speak to the congregation through the public address system.

Today's sermon was a continuation of every week's sermon on the evils of science, and how godless people would tempt the unwary into deceit through the use of technology. "It is far better that we live in God's mighty shadow here in Reno, than be like those heathens in New Denver," the old pastor intoned firmly, as he raised his bony finger skyward. "Let not Satan take hold of your precious soul, for God has proven that we humans are truly the only children God created in this universe."

The old pastor fidgeted for a moment as he flipped through his tablet screens to find the log-on code for the main screen. "I again direct your attention to the monitor and, if it's too far away for you to see clearly, turn on the small screen in the headrest of the seat in front of you, where you will see our Lord's true evolutionary tree of life." There it was, Darwin's tree of life, clearly showing man as the only creation, set apart and separate from all the other animals of this world. All the animals that had survived the wars, that is.

"You can see here ancient Atlantis, which God cast out into the depths of space as punishment for their reliance on technology, His mighty hand ripping them and their land from Earth and sending them skyward!" The old pastor adjusted his earpiece and flipped through a few more screens on his tablet, as he waited for the congregation to be impressed by his clarity. "These Atlantians are the demons the Bible spoke of. That's right, the Bible gave humanity the answer, but humanity refused to listen, and we were punished for our arrogance!" The old pastor's voice began to rise in volume as he pushed the faders up on his tablet.

"And here, here, see? These are the Taskers of New Eden. They too were human. The devil's own creation, the spawn of science. They too were human!" The old pastor was turning red in the face. "I tell you this! The Bible has always said that God created man, separate from the animals. We were saved by Noah, and then saved again by Jesus! You will only be saved if you accept Jesus! And I tell you..." The crowd rose and cheered, nearly shaking the rafters that held up the roof of glass. The sun was high in the sky and rays of light beamed down upon the pastor in his elaborate red, silver, and white robes, creating a colorful spectacle for the congregation.

Outside, the noonday sun had raised the temperature to the one-hundred-degree mark, but no one inside was concerned, for the air filtration and moderation system functioned perfectly to keep the crowd cool and refreshed. "Yes, brothers and sisters, science and its henchman, technology, defied the word of God by opening the doors to hell itself and letting in those who God himself had cast out. I speak of those called the Dinosauroids." This time the old pastor's voice seemed hushed, as if he was revealing a great secret. "That some among us today continue to defile God's perfect realm by communicating with these beasts... well, it makes me sad for those lost heathens in New Denver." The pastor seemed to slump down, shaking his head, as if accepting defeat.

The crowd again rose up in defiance; yells of resistance could be heard. The pastor's face appeared on all the monitors, as he looked into the camera and said, "Go home now, my children, back to your sanctuaries, and remember, we must all fight to resist those outsiders who seek to enter and destroy our perfect union here under God."

Friends greeted each other and spoke to the pastor but, in time, the building emptied as all returned to their daily lives.

That afternoon, Joshua was surfing the data stream from his work computer when he stumbled upon an old, archived video from the turn of the millennium. The subject was a subterranean fort for the homeowner. This fallout shelter was guaranteed to keep one's family safe from an atomic bomb threat.

Joshua spent the rest of the evening researching this fort and the role it played in human history. By morning, he had decided that he wanted a bunker like this built in his back yard for his family. It would also be good for research for his history class.

It took several weeks of communication with various companies around the world, which at first had no idea what he was after. Finally, he stumbled on a nanobot program under development at one of the universities. They were studying the effects of AutoCAD creations built by micro robots in the development of sustainable structures, some very advanced technologies, and the durability of such creations. Put into the simplest terms, thousands of very small robots were programmed to build a three-dimensional structure, of a specific size and shape, in the ground, using only the minerals found in the soils into which they had been injected.

Joshua thought that would be perfect. He'd allow the scientists to test their invention in his back yard and build a fallout shelter that he could then show to history students as a prime

example of how America's forefathers lived.

For almost a year the diligent little robots hummed away in his back yard building a sizable bunker. Often Joshua would make a digital recording of the construction zone and the small robots at work to show to his history students. He wanted the bunker to be authentic for the period and as a result, was also determined to find and install furniture and fittings from that time.

Debbie watched her husband's obsession blossom. She was impressed with the level of detail Joshua managed to achieve in the reconstruction. Chairs, beds, and bathrooms of the period were installed in the bunker and the colorful flags of Germany and America hung from the walls. But the most impressive thing, by far, was the track armored personnel carrier that sat poised for duty just inside the main door of the subterranean structure. The structure had taken only a little less time to build than it took to find, build, and then install the carrier, complete with several gallons of working diesel.

The town was abuzz with this reconstruction, and kids from the history class begged their fathers for just such a thing to be built in their own back yards. During the year of development, the old pastor even asked Joshua to come up to the church's podium and give a talk regarding the bunker and the lives of the ancestors who had lived during this period. Joshua went into some detail of the strong family values of these forgotten pioneers, and how wholesome and pure, with a strong father figure leading, these ancient Germans and Americans were.

Sadly, the world had rejected, even then, the word of God and, as a result, only these good ancestors with their bunkers and faith managed to survive, to once again rise into the sunlight and sing the praises of a merciful God. Following the story of Noah, the bunker became known as a modern-day Ark, where the children of God could hide and pray until his mighty wrath had subsided. Joshua's history talks became very popular events at church. However, as time passed, the topic became stale.

Three years had passed when the heathens to the east once again called down upon the peoples of Earth the wrath of God, this time in the form of the Grays. The people of Reno were told in sermons that this time, the fools had indeed opened Pandora's Box.

"And now! Now I tell you all here! Yet again, these impure, unholy, unrighteous fools have yet again used their science to call down upon our heads the wrath of God. Brothers and sisters, pray with me, that our mighty Lord will once again find forgiveness for these blind fools," the old pastor said, with a trembling in his voice as bombs exploded not far from the church door.

When the weekly sermon was done, Joshua and Debbie, with their two sons, Jeremiah and Josephus, walked the seven miles back home. No longer were the robot transports working, or the lawn maintenance bots. The roads were littered with rubble and many homes burned and destroyed. The entire town of Reno had refused to participate in another foolish war and, as a result, received no support or defense from the rest of the country. The Grays, it was soon realized, were so superior in technology that nothing could be done to stop them, so the town felt their self-righteous stance was justified.

Joshua thought of the fleet of spaceships, which the military had proudly claimed would be able to protect Earth from any attack. Incredibly, the fleet had been vaporized in a few short weeks. That just proved, once again, that the godless politicians in New Denver were ignoring those who could deliver the truth, the word of God.

"Dear, is that the Johnson family standing at our front door?" Debbie asked.

Joshua looked up from his aching feet. "Yes, I believe you're right, as always, my love. I wonder what they want."

"I do hope it's not about that salad bowl from last year's picnic. That thing was shattered by a bomb blast weeks ago," Debbie said.

As they approached, Joshua said, "Hey, neighbor, this is an unexpected visit. How can we help you?"

Byron Johnson replied, "We got a proposition for you. Nancy and I got to thinking the other night about that fallout shelter you got out back, and, well, we were wondering if you all would like to join us living in there until this blows over. My daughter Bell here is having a real hard time sleeping at nights, what with all the goings on. We have lots of food and Nancy here loves to cook." Byron prodded his wife in the ribs.

Joshua perked up. "What a great suggestion! I didn't think anyone would be interested in that old thing." He always got excited when anyone found an artifact of history interesting. He was almost dancing with delight at the whole idea.

Not so with Debbie. But Jeremiah was enthusiastic because he liked Bell, though he didn't have the courage to tell her. Josephus wasn't keen. Bell had always been mean to him in school, and the thought of being stuck with her just seemed wrong.

"We can make it an Ark-like event, you know, the way you described in church that one time," Byron added as he rubbed his hands together.

"I like the way you think, neighbor," replied Joshua as he opened the front door to the house.

"Great, great, we'll go get our stuff and meet you all out back in say, two hours?" Byron asked.

"See you then," Joshua replied, very chipper. The family scurried about the house collecting various possessions and, two hours later, they headed out back. They were surprised at what they found when they arrived there.

"Hope you don't mind, Joshua," Byron said. "The wife was talking to the neighbors, the Bolts here, and well, one thing led to another, and they asked if they could come too. Nate here is a huge sports fan."

"Well..."

Joshua was cut off by his younger son. "I think we should, Dad." Nate Bolt's daughter DeLouise was incredibly beautiful, or so Josephus thought.

Joshua and Debbie had spoken of Nate's wife, Jan, on occasion. They were uncomfortable with her, knowing that she had once been a practicing Hindu but, with his son being so insistent, Joshua said, "Sounds good, plenty of room in there for all."

From over the fence came another voice. "You all having a swank in that there bunker, neighbor?" It was Joshua's neighbor from the other side, a half-Chinese and half-British man, Mike Wang.

Joshua had never much cared for Mike. He was a bit of a braggart, but Debbie liked Mike's wife, Betty, so for her sake, Joshua kindly extended an invitation to them to join the bunker crew.

"That's mighty white of you, let me get my stuff and the missus," Mike said.

So, there they were, like the twelve disciples of God, recreating the Noah's Ark experience for the night.

But God had other plans for this Night of the Black Rain.

The twelve walked down the long concrete ramp to the massive overhead door that allowed entrance into the underground complex. After everyone was inside, the steel door was slowly lowered to the closed position and the families began milling through the complex, staking out areas to settle in for the stay. As was typical, after the men had moved boxes and bags in, they

sat in the main room to watch news reports on the monitors. The women retired to the kitchen to cook up a feast, proving that no matter how enlightened the rest of the world might be, the religious fraternity was still locked on autopilot with regard to the sexes.

"See, this is what the pastor means by idiot science," Byron said to the men as he smacked the monitor hard on its side. "These technology guys invent the damn things, and then they break down and leave us regular folks sitting in the dark." The monitor was only sporadically connecting to the data stream and, as a result, it was nearly impossible to make any sense of the news reports on the war. All they knew was that things were not looking good for the Earth forces in battle, and much ground had been lost to the Grays. The aliens seemed little interested in fighting civilians, however, and apparently only ever attacked military targets.

"Just leave the thing and let's open a couple bottles of those spirits I saw Nate bring in," Mike said smoothly, hoping he didn't sound too eager to drink the night away.

"Sounds good to me, is it good with you, Joshua?" Nate asked.

"Sure, it'll be a little while before the girls manage to get some food on the table. Besides, that should distract Byron from hitting the monitor," Joshua responded, with a laugh. Bottles were opened and drinks went around, and, after some time and talk, the women put a big spread on the table. Nate was given the honor of saying evening prayers before everyone dove in.

About halfway through a fine meal, there was a knocking at the big door to the bunker. Joshua rose to answer, but Byron said, "Just leave it, we're doing the Ark thing, right? Remember, Noah heard knocks and refused to answer, so let us do that, too. Later we can explain to the person outside what we were doing."

"Sounds very exciting," Jan said. "Like being part of the bible for real for one night."

"All right," Joshua agreed as he sat back down and continued to eat. The knocking continued for some time but eventually stopped.

Everyone spent time at the table discussing how Noah must have felt having to turn people away, knowing that just outside his big door, women with children were drowning. The debate went on for some time, as the families moved to the big room after the meal. The kids were given the task of cleaning up and the parents opened a few more bottles of spirits. Talk about the bible went on late into the evening until, gradually, people retired to their areas, eager for a night's sleep.

Of course, there were no windows in the bunker, so the rooms were dark and quiet, which meant that almost everyone rose very late in the morning. At breakfast, the women decided to start cooking something for supper. It was so late in the morning anyway that it only made sense to stay where they were and continue the adventure. Conversation again revolved around the bible and, after a short day, a fine meal, and more spirits, everyone again headed off to bed.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

What was happening outside? A disaster for Earth. The war with the Grays had been raging for months, and to say that things looked bad for Earth's forces was a huge understatement. Nothing the military did seemed to make any difference. The combined technology of the Taskers, Neo Terra and Earth had little effect.

No, the world laser system was the first line of defense to be destroyed, then the space-borne fleets. Yes, I know, it seems almost impossible that all those ships could have been destroyed so quickly. But they were.

The ground forces were easily overrun at every skirmish, as were the lunar forces and those of Mars. The only reason the Grays hadn't yet completely overrun Earth was because it's so big. Small pockets of humans continued to fight back from every valley and mountain.

Didn't the other planets help? Of course. They'd already sent all their soldiers to Earth, except for skeleton forces. The government panicked and sent out new calls to the Tasker and Neo Terra worlds but, with travel times, little could be done to help Earth's forces. The only redeeming feature, from the point of view of humanity, was that the Grays apparently had no interest in attacking civilian positions as long as the militaries stayed away from them.

Not that any of this mattered.

Why?

The Grays decided to put an end to the fighting. They were angry about what the *Enola Gay* had done to their ships, and they didn't intend to risk a repeat of that disaster.

Then came the deluge, the Night of the Black Rain, for deep in space the Grays had been building their final solution. Humanity didn't see it coming and would have had no way of defending against it in any case. To say that the Grays' technology was superior was to say that humanity, in comparison, had hardly a brain at all.

Of course, you want to know what the Grays did. It was amazing.

The Grays had amassed several gigantic iron cores and meteorites on the far side of the sun. Over several Earth weeks, they pulverized the iron and kept the fragments in suspension. They repeated the pulverization until they had created an unbelievably huge cloud of jagged black shards floating in space, each shard just large enough to survive descent through the atmosphere and arrive on Earth's surface at about the size of a 50-caliber shell. Like a huge ribbon in space, the Grays started the shards traveling toward Earth. When the line of fragments struck the planet, it extended from pole to pole and traveled in a line some five miles wide toward the rotation of the planet.

Yes, Reader, we can be very grateful that we weren't there. And here's just one story that shows why.

A young mother pushed a carriage, decorated with pale blue ribbons and containing her newborn son, down a suburban street in East Reno. She thought she heard a hissing noise but, before she could glance around, black shards began falling from the sky. She darted this way and that, trying to escape, unable to understand what was happening, or even to believe she wasn't hallucinating or caught in a nightmare.

A foot-long red-hot shard pierced her baby's body, stilling its cry, and she stood frozen, stunned, and horrified. Before she could move again, another shard went through the top of her head, killing her.

By nightfall, a foot of hot iron covered the world. The mother and her child lay beneath this first layer of iron, so shattered and burned that there were no ridges to even mark their position.

You're right, Reader, it was horrible. And you can multiply that mother's experience by close to two billion.

For four days and nights, the fragments fell across the whole surface of the planet, annihilating everything in their path. All the trees, animals, crops, and the cities with their people, were torn and shredded, then pulverized into the ground. Because of the speed and weight of the molten iron and the fires it set, nothing remained standing anywhere that was more than a few feet above the surface of the planet, and a layer of five to six feet of metal shards covered all the land and hissed to the bottom of seas and lakes.

Did the iron keep on burning? Oh, no, the first four or five feet cooled and hardened. Some

of the final layer of shards melded into the cooling iron, often with sharp ends pointing upward, but some of the black rain lay loosely on the surface.



Other than the knocking at the door, the people in the bunker had heard nothing and saw nothing, for the monitor no longer worked at all. Therefore, when they awoke and dressed on the third day, they decided to go outside and rejoin society. However, they could not get the big door to open. They spent the whole day trying, but the thing seemed jammed. They tried late into the night and, when exhausted, retired once again to their rooms. Tomorrow they would succeed.

At around noon on day four, the only door into the bunker finally moved upward about six inches. Sharp black metal shards poured through the opening and scattered across the floor.

"What the hell?" Byron exclaimed.

"Damn it!" said Betty, as she cut her fingers trying to pick up one of the razor-sharp shards that skidded across the floor to rest at her feet. The other women rushed to her side to help her with the bleeding. The guys stood, dumfounded, staring at the mess of black metal bits.

"So, what now, Dad? Are we trapped in here?" Jeremiah asked, as he kicked at a fragment that easily penetrated his boot and stuck in its sole.

"We're not licked yet, kids. Go get me those diesel cans from the back room. I say we start this tank I paid good money for, and see if we can pull the door down," Joshua commanded.

It took some time before the group managed to get the old tank filled with fuel. They first had to figure out where the fuel was supposed to go, and it took them even longer to figure out how to start and drive it. It was evening before the men managed to get the tank chained to the door, and then they stopped because of exhaustion and complaints from the women about the stink of diesel fuel.

It was decided that the following day would be an all-out effort to regain their freedom. The men spent the rest of the evening talking about the never-ending shards that seemed to be pouring into the bunker, and wondered if someone might even be playing a prank on the small group.

The next morning, with everyone helping, they used pieces of furniture, or anything else that was solid, to clear all the shards to the sides of the entrance ramp. The shards stopped pouring in, and daylight could be seen under the partly opened door.

"Well, halleluiah, God's blessed sunlight is still out there," Mike stated with a chuckle, obviously relieved.

The women ran for cover, taking the kids in tow, as the big tank surged to life. Within moments, the door had been pulled down and away from the entrance, exposing the true horror of the state of God's world. Another surge of black shards poured into the bunker from the ramp that led up to the back yard, causing Nate to yell to the women and kids to stay put, and not come looking until he said so. The men stood silent for some time, staring at the unreal scene, before Joshua finally said, "Help me unchain this tank. Let's drive up the ramp and have a look around."

The men did as they were told, then climbed aboard as Joshua fired up the monster and, with some difficulty, drove the tank out of the bunker, over the deep ridge of hard iron, and up to the surface of their area. What greeted their eyes through the small windows was more than horror. It was more than they could even comprehend.

Mike spat, "What the fuck has science done now! Where the hell is everyone? Where's the goddamn church? Damn it, what have those fools in Denver done now?"

The armored personnel carrier tank they were in had the ability to lower the back door to any desired angle so that it doubled as a ramp. They set the rear door to 'level,' and all climbed out of the tank to have a good look around. The four men stood on the top of the tank for some time silently staring off in all directions. But all they could see was a great black wasteland of metal shards that looked too sharp to even walk on. "Let's drive to higher ground, maybe this is an isolated disaster," Joshua said as he moved back inside the tank to the driver's seat.

"Damn rights!" snapped Mike. Underneath the anger, he sounded nearly hysterical.

They drove for some time, trying every direction, but everywhere the landscape looked the same. When they saw the fuel was running low and knowing no one had the ability to walk home on sharp black shards, they returned to the bunker.

"So, it's like this everywhere?" Betty whined.

"Yes, everywhere we drove, the lands looked the same," replied Nate calmly.

"Surely it can't be everywhere?" said Debbie. "Surely our house is still standing. I don't know what I'll do if my house is gone." She looked near to tears.

"It was the same everywhere we could see," Joshua said gently to his wife. He did not want to frighten her further by saying that the world they had known now all looked like a bleak moonscape.

"Dad, I'm scared," pleaded DeLouise as she clutched at his arm.

"I am too, dear. I have no idea what's happened," responded Nate tenderly.

"Well, it's simple, isn't it!" Mike snapped, still unnerved. "We got a little food and water left here, and a good tank with diesel. I say we drive out tomorrow and go west before we starve!"

"Why west?" queried Joshua.

"The nearest town is west of here. They're good people, and they'll take us in. Beats going east to that damn hell hole Denver!" Mike said. His voice was still shaking, but he spoke as if his idea was not open for debate. "Anyway, if it's real bad out there, it's best we go to the ocean where we can get fish and water. And the ocean is west."

The group was a little uneasy about being bossed by Mike, but his idea did make sense. For now, anyway. They all retired for the night, and come morning, rose, and packed as much as they could in and onto the tank. The kids were told to stay inside the carrier with their moms as the three men, Mike, Nate and Byron, rode atop the tank, barking directions to Joshua in the driver's seat.

The day was very hot and, inside the crowded tank, even hotter. The sky looked burned, and waves of heat rose from the surface of the black shards. The tank crawled along at a walking speed, for Joshua didn't know that the tank had gears which would increase the rate of travel. The terrain stretched on and on in endless desolation, like the world after Noah's flood. There were no trees, no grass, no flowers, no animals, no people. Just an eerie and unbelievably barren black desert.

One full day of listening to the crunching and scraping of tank tracks crawling over black metal in the blazing heat frayed the nerves of the travelers. Nightfall was worse, when they were faced with the challenge of where to sleep. They fit easily into the tank as long as they are sitting, but it was quite another thing to find places to stretch out and lie down on the hot metal surface. Mike made a few flippant remarks that kept most of them awake even longer. Betty tried to smooth things over, but the damage was done.

The second day had the old steel tank crawling west in the heat again, this time with the two boys allowed to sit up on the roof of the tank with Mike and Nate. Byron quietly sat next to Joshua at the controls for some time before he finally said, "Look, Joshua, we both have kids and

I'm sure you're like me, you would do anything to keep them safe."

Joshua nodded in agreement.

"Good, good," Byron said, "because I was thinking, and I don't want to alarm the others, but at our rate of travel, the nearest town is at least five more days from here, and our water is not going to last forever in this heat."

"I see what you're saying," replied Joshua as he pulled at the controls to keep the tank running straight ahead. "You know of a place somewhere ahead where we can replenish our water supplies?"

"That's just it, see, there is no place ahead. Look around, it's all the same. Black and desolate. I'm thinking the ocean will be the only water we find, and we got kids." Byron's voice was still quiet.

"I'm not following you," Joshua said, as he turned his head to meet Byron's gaze.

"What I'm saying is, Mike and Betty don't have kids, and we do, and we also have only so much water," Byron stated flatly. There was little emotion in his tone.

Joshua looked shocked. "Do you realize what you're saying? We are still worshipers of God. Are you asking us to leave them to die?"

"What I'm saying is, ask yourself what Noah would have done in the same situation. Do you think that after they left the Ark and the waters receded, they could start harvesting crops right away? Do you think the hippos would instantly produce calves to provide meat for Noah and the rest of the meat eaters?" Byron responded coolly.

"What?" Joshua said. "We survived. God picked us, just like God picked Noah."

"I have no idea how God convinced you to make a bunker," Byron said, "but we're now in the same situation as Noah, if you think about it. It appears that the hand of God has wiped all life from the planet, and we are the only survivors. We owe it to our kids to ensure they survive. I won't let anything happen to my Bell." Byron went on searching for words, trying to force some sense into the situation. "Besides, Mike's half chink."

There it was, laid bare for the world to see. Billions had died, but racism survived.

At first, Joshua did not even realize what Byron had just suggested, that because Mike was of Chinese descent, it was somehow acceptable for him to be sacrificed. He focused on his two boys and the love of his wife and thought maybe Byron was somewhat right. They had survived, just like Noah. They did face a world destroyed by some higher power; a world laid waste where no crops could be grown. Anyway, even if they found bare ground, no seeds could grow in time to feed the empty bellies they already had.

"We can't just ask them to leave," Joshua finally said, after a long silence.

"I got that figured out," replied Bryan. "Those Army stretchers they been sleeping on, those come off the wall real easy. We just pack them out at night and go; let God decide their fate. They both take sleeping pills. They'll never wake up."

Some time passed before Joshua said quietly, "Let me think about this for a bit. What you said earlier, that sounds like science talk, you know?"

"The part about the hippo?" Byron asked.

Joshua nodded. "Well maybe not really, but a Sunday school question one kid asked me some time back got me to thinking. How did they survive? I mean, the Ark could only hold a given amount of food to feed the plant eaters and the meat eaters. That might be fine for the forty-day trip, but when they landed and the water receded, they were on Mount Ararat, in Turkey. I've seen the place and it's barren. I don't see how it would grow much, and they had to feed the animals because the flood would have killed all plant life worldwide. I mean, nothing

like trees or grass can live under water for forty days without oxygen, right?"

Byron said, "Who's to know how God did it? All I know is He did. You don't usually question His wisdom."

The second day and night of travel passed. The third and fourth days were just as bad, and water was dwindling. The fifth day had Mike at the controls of the tank, crunching along at a crawl, as the other three men sat on the roof and agreed that ridding themselves of Mike and Betty had to be done. It was decided that they would carry the couple far from the tank that night, out into the black fields. But how?

Nate had found metal plates along the surface of the tank that could be removed. With a little work, the men fashioned metal snowshoes to navigate the shards. That night, while everyone slept, the three men packed the couple far from the tank, and then returned to sleep. The morning brought panic as the women tried to find out where Mike and Betty were.

"It had to be done, it had to be done! Think of the kids," Joshua kept saying to his frantic wife.

"You bastard! She was my friend!" Debbie screamed, as the kids cried without understanding.

"Oh God, I think I can hear them calling." Nancy cried. She covered her ears.

Byron was at the controls, driving the tank in a panic, as Nate and Joshua tried to soothe the families. The women pleaded for their friends, but the tank rolled on until the din resolved into only the drone of the motor and the thrashing of metal shards on the tank tracks. The eighth day rolled around, with no ocean in sight, no conversation, little water and no rest, nothing but the staggering heat.

Once again, Byron quietly sat next to Joshua at the controls. Finally, he said in almost a whisper, "Jan use to be a Hindu."

"No! No, damn it!" Joshua shoved Byron, knocking him off the small seat.

"I'm just saying is all." Byron moved outside again, to the roof of the tank.

The last thing anyone expected was for the four kids to run away. But sometime during the night, they had gathered up some food and a little water, fitted the metal plates from the tank's hull to their shoes and stolen away into the darkness.

The morning brought frantic hysteria when the adults realized the children were missing. Debbie shook so hard that she could not keep her legs under her and fell to the floor of the tank, sobbing. Jan tried to comfort her as the yelling went on and blame was passed around. The plates were gone, so the men couldn't search on foot. The tank raced off at a crawl, first in one direction, then in another. After about four hours they stopped.

"We have to keep going west now. That's more important than ever. When we get there, we can find help. Maybe someone has a transport we can use, or maybe the military can send some soldiers," Joshua yelled. "We don't have the fuel to go on driving around lost, looking for the kids, and still hope to reach the west coast. They took food and water; they'll be fine for now. And I think I found a way to get the tank to go faster."

"You bastard!" was all that Debbie could gasp out between uncontrollable sobs.

The tank turned west and lumbered off, now in second gear, which was just a bit faster than a walking pace. The days passed and no one spoke. Soon a new noise was heard, a clanking noise from under the tank's floor. No matter how many times they looked from the suspended back door, they could see nothing. Then the tank veered sharply to one side. Everyone was flung against the walls as it started going in circles.

The track had sheared apart because of the higher speed and the days of travel on sharp

metal shards. Nothing they tried could make the tank go straight. The six remaining adults broke into a flurry of blaming; the yelling in the confining metal tank went on until most were hoarse. The heat was intense enough that often one of them would pass out, causing the remaining members to panic, for the fear of death was uppermost in everyone's mind. They sat there for a few days, until the food was gone, knowing the water might last only another day. Joshua finally agreed that something needed to be done.

Rummaging around the tank, he gathered up a shovelhead, a few pots, bits of wood from seats, anything that could be fastened to the soles of their shoes. By about midday, the six members finally had enough materials to protect their feet from the shards, so they struck out west.

They were stunned to find themselves surprisingly close to the ocean. They walked for less than an hour before they faced a reddish-gray body of water that stretched on to the horizon. The water made a sick slopping sound against the shore and felt warm to the touch. There were no signs of life anywhere. No birds, not even insects.

After more blaming and arguing, they split into three groups. Joshua and Debbie would stay where they were to ensure the group had a return point. Byron and Nancy went south, leaving north for Nate and Jan. The two couples started out immediately, favoring the daylight to search for help.

"You bastard," Debbie mumbled repeatedly under her breath. She could not comprehend the actions of this man to whom she had dedicated her life, this man who had fathered her two children and yet left them in the black metal desert to die.

"I didn't ask for this! All I wanted was to protect you and the kids," Joshua stammered in response. He knelt and prayed, which did not impede Debbie's mumbling in the slightest.

The two sweated through the heat of the day. In the evening, Joshua set up a small light, run from the tank's radio battery they had brought with them, to help guide the other two couples back through the dark. No one returned. After three days, Joshua was sure that no one ever would. He sat on the small metal shield from his left foot and used the right shield to rest both his feet on. Debbie had stumbled down the beach to see if she could find signs of the other couples. Both were starving, weak, and exhausted. They'd been unable to sleep on the razor-sharp shards and had to remain standing until Joshua figured out a way to sit down.

As he sat, he thought about the futility of surviving any disaster of this magnitude. Nothing would ever be the same again; no more school, stores, TV, refrigerators stocked with food and beer. A bleak future of endless solitude loomed over him, with no people, no church, nothing. His stomach hurt. Joshua had never been really hungry in his life until now. He took out the gun he'd hidden inside his shirt, raised it to his mouth, said a prayer, and pulled the trigger.

Debbie heard the gunshot and rushed back, stumbling and tripping through the shards. When she arrived, Joshua was dead. She cried out and screamed, then cursed herself for being so hard on her husband. Slowly she reached for the gun, pointed it at her heart and pulled the trigger.

The trigger went 'click.' That was all, just 'click,' no matter how many times she tried. Just a simple, quiet 'click.'

"Bastard!"

Chapter 9 Charger on patrol

Charger spoke into the data recorder. "Day two hundred and thirty-seven, ten AM Earth central time. I have been awakened from cryogenic sleep by a message from Neo Terra. Seems they have lost contact with Earth and decided to get me out of bed to have a look around. Stupid humans."

He stopped, took a breath, and continued. "I have to say, sometimes it does feel good not to have Mac or Jill's thoughts rolling about in my head. Checked the stasis containers and all the biomass from Vesta is intact, but I've got to ask someone someday, why the hell are we keeping all of Earth's life forms in test tubes? Especially the humans?"

Charger turned the data recorder off and set about starting the systems needed to land the ship on Earth.

The memory that his two companions were long since dead suddenly became vivid. Also, the fact that Mac and Jill had met their deaths at his hands. Sometimes long periods of sleep left him confused. Possibly, like an old soldier who has lost a limb, the ghost of that limb still seemed to remain. It rekindled his hatred of humanity all over again, for it was they who had decided that they would never feel safe with such monsters as Lycans around. He felt betrayed, abandoned to a life of piloting a mobile fridge. But as quick as the hate rose, it faded, replaced with something that might have been sorrow.

The message had taken some time to get to Charger's craft and included commands to take the craft to Earth, interrupting his scheduled course to Neo Terra. By the time he had reset all the controls and checked the systems, Charger was passing Mars and only a few hours from Earth. Reaching into the small leather pouch at his side, he retrieved some dried meat and a vial of blood. He leaned back in the command seat and ate and drank while he enjoyed the view. When the descent lights blinked and the alarm sounded, Charger realized he was not belted into his chair. Scrambling and dropping food, he hurried to buckle in, just in time for the descent engine to fire up and thrust him forward in the harness as the craft underwent a rapid reduction in velocity.

"Stupid humans and their stupid ships, what's so hard about giving an alarm sooner?" he choked out as his throat was shoved hard into the harness.

It was a rough descent but, moments later, he was cruising across the sky looking at the most amazing sight his old eyes had ever witnessed. The Earth was black, as far as he could see, just black. It sometimes glinted in the sunlight, occasionally so brightly that he had to squint. Sunlight was a threat to his existence, so he cruised slowly over the planet until he reached a shadowed area where he could stop and get out to inspect the black ground.

The ship descended and, as it made contact with the surface of the Earth, the landing pads shifted wildly, as if the craft were landing on a sheet of ice. This resulted in Charger being tossed around in the cabin before the engine stopped. Finally, the craft sat firm, but at a slight angle to the ground.

The cabin door opened, revealing a never-ending vista of black iron shards. As he walked around outside, the shards seemed sharp enough to cut through his old armor but failed to do so. Charger spent a few minutes stretching in the damp and silence of the night as he paced. "Ah, how I've missed your coolness on my face."

He returned to the craft, picked the shards from his boots, and started the engines to lift the ship back into the air. He circled the globe several times, calling on all frequencies but getting no

response. For a couple of days, he diligently scanned the surface in all the light spectrums, searching for survivors, but found none.

Returning to orbit, Charger sent a message to Neo Terra. "All life on Earth is gone. The world is black, covered with metal shards. No idea what happened. Nothing remains in orbit to give me any answers and there are no responses from Mars or the moon." That done, Charger returned to cryogenic sleep as his craft resumed its course to Neo Terra.

However, deep in the darkness of space, a Gray ship, watching and waiting, stirred to life as Charger's ship flew toward Neo Terra. It began to follow him.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

All the data, photos and scans that Charger sent raced at near the speed of light to Neo Terra as Charger's ship plodded through space.

You bet they were upset, Reader! The reaction on Neo Terra was one of horror, and then fury, as every single remaining human began boarding massive war ships, fully geared and prepped to do battle with whoever was responsible for the genocide. Massive Tasker-style tanks and biomechanical mechanoids, with heavily armored humans, set off toward Earth. Sometime, in the darkness of space, the path of Charger's ship crossed that of the battle fleet. No one saw; all were in cryogenic sleep.

The Gray ship following Charger turned around and began following the Neo Terra fleet back toward Earth.

Yes, it was lucky the Gray didn't follow Charger, because this one simple act lost the location of Neo Terra to the Grays.

Could they plot where it was? No, the planet was a rogue, black and hollow, wandering an erratic course through the depths of space. Even if the Grays had managed to plot the course of Charger's small craft to its destination, the destination was in motion in such a random fashion that finding Neo Terra again would have been almost impossible without a locator signal. The only way the original Earth fleet had been able to retrace the path the Mahouds, the first invaders, had taken was from back engineering their ships.

What happened to the Neo Terra fleet? I'll describe it for you.

Fifty battle cruisers, twelve dreadnaughts, a type of short-range fighter-bomber craft, and thirty-five heavy transports approached Earth. These were filled to maximum capacity with every human that could be found on Neo Terra, all determined to fight to the death in defense of Earth.

They did not have long to wait.

Following this massive armada was the lone Gray ship. It had sent a signal to its home world, informing the leaders that more humans were approaching the ironbound planet.

Sixty thousand human troops were held in stasis as the fleet plied black space and began to slow as computer programs prepared the ships for orbit. Each ship had a dedicated group of pilots and engineers who were first to be drawn from hibernation. They were integral to the fleet's ability to find a safe orbit. They were, perhaps fortunately, the only humans to be awake as the fleet settled into a stable orbit.

An armada of Gray spacecraft suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere, all around them. No, the Grays did not arrive from some wormhole in space nor drop out of hyperspace, nor warp into an orbit with a commanding advantage over the helpless human battle fleet.

How did they do it? The Grays had discovered a different and amazing method of space travel. They would send quantum entangled particles across space, powered by dark energy, the wave particles linked to dark matter, traveling faster than the speed of light. These particles could manifest themselves at a point in space in mere moments, as they tunneled through the fabric of spacetime to meet their twins with the opposite charge. With the two particles linked over the vastness of the cosmos, the connection created a bridge between the two states, allowing the Grays to blink into existence as if by magic.

They had simply always been there. Though they were from a distant galaxy, their universe was in existence in tandem with our own. Quantum entanglement had long shown that two particles could exist at incredible distances from one another and still be linked by 'spooky actions.'

The Grays' actions were now obliterating every human battleship in orbit around Earth. The burning hulks fell into Earth's gravity well, while the only humans awake on the bridges of these ships screamed in fear. Their broken ships plummeted through the atmosphere and smashed into the ironclad planet.

The Grays fired advanced weapons at the human ships, obliterating them from existence. If the humans had had the opportunity to fire back, they might have caused some damage.

However, this day was the last for humanity. Every ship fell, like a burning lava stone cast from an angry volcano, onto Earth, which humanity had once called its home. The Grays simply swatted the fleet aside, much as humans had swatted insects from buzzing about their ears.

There were no Gray casualties.

There were no human survivors.

Chapter 10 Charger on Neo Terra

Charger's small spaceship finally reached the vicinity of Neo Terra, and he was revived from his long sleep. He ate some food, then staggered to the control center of the craft to contact the space port orbiting the planet. He placed the communication module over his ear and spoke into the microphone. "Transit module 1555, in proximity of com stock control, do you receive, over." There was silence. He tried again, "Transit mod 1555, in close orbit to com stock, you guys home over there?" Still silence.

Charger tried several other frequencies, but all were silent. He resorted to pounding the communication module with his fist, then finally gave up. "I'm not sitting up here till you idiots get it together. I'm landing. Deal with it, you princesses!" Tossing the module to the floor of the craft, he took control of the ship and started the landing procedures. There was only one entrance to the interior of Neo Terra, a dark, narrow, twisting tunnel cut into the planet's crust. Usually, the computers took control of an approaching vessel and guided it in, but Charger found the task wasn't that difficult.

His ship squeezed through the dark tunnel until, like a submarine surfacing from under water, it lifted upward and broke into a pressurized air pocket that was the landing bay proper. The systems shut down upon landing and Charger made his way to the exit hatch.

The bay was cold and dark, the two things Charger liked best. He wandered through rooms and down corridors, using communicators to search for anyone who might be around. After a few hours, it became obvious that no one was there. How refreshing, Charger thought. No humans!

He wandered the city streets to an old café he liked to visit. It was empty. He made himself a coffee, sat in the solitude and silence, and breathed in the smells of the deserted city. His mind returned to the time when he was still joined to Jill and Mac, and to conversations they'd had, hashing over points of view, and having arguments. He sometimes thought about the love and compassion they said they had for people in their past, before their conversion, but he could not empathize.

Those conversations had been so long ago, so long. Then, as was typical, memories of their deaths returned, the feeling of holding Jill against him as he took her life and the involuntary jerk of Mac's body. A burning hatred of humanity welled up again from deep in that black pit containing his heart.

It was good to be alone, good that no humans were around wanting to make small talk with him. Even better if he could be forgotten and set free of this long life. Since the Mahoud-Earth War began in 2030, he'd had two hundred and twenty-five years of watching humanity fight and squabble, of being asked to kill in order to save the humans he had grown to despise.

A plan began to form in his mind. "I will be a god. I will be a god of this world." With no one else on the planet, he could turn off the locator beacon and forever lose this world in the depths of space. The rogue planet would be free to wander, and he would be free to create new life, life he could teach, control, and guide.

Mac had often said to Charger that his Jewish faith told him Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, rejected by an angry god. But Charger kept arguing his own belief that Adam and Eve had rejected god and that, in a sense, they kicked god out of Eden. Charger had no doubts about rejecting all notions of a creator. He argued that humans had never left Eden.

Well, Neo Terra would now be Eden. He decided to give its new inhabitants free will from

the moment of creation, free will with no restrictions.

He sat on a hill talking to himself for a while, letting his plan take shape.



Silence. Everywhere there was silence.

Charger walked the deserted streets of the city, quietly looking into empty stores and restaurants, never finding a single living being. Half-full coffee cups remained unfinished next to the half-eaten, decaying food on plates. It was as if, during the call to action in a vain attempt to save Earth, every human that had called Neo Terra home suddenly and spontaneously deserted the hollow black world. They had left the power on, though, and the computer grid that kept the city functioning worked efficiently.

Three days after Charger landed, he went to the city operations building. Here he would access the main network hub and attempt to scan the planet for life forms. The building was old, very old, for it had once been the central temple of the great city of the Mahouds. From this building, they had piloted the ancient city through space, traveling the stars, only to crash and be buried deep inside this hollow world.

The main network-hubs control office was a marvel of ancient Mahoud technology, now mixed with Earth's and New Eden's advancements. Charger found the computers humming, keeping the city working. He gently pressed buttons on the keypad, trying not to let his great size and strength damage the controls. After asking the main hub to search for life forms, he lowered his great bulk on a sofa. He sat there for the better part of three days, neither eating nor sleeping, just breathing deeply, and staring off into space.

On the third day, with the drone of ceiling lights in his ears and the dry static air arcing from his fingertips every time he scratched his scalp, there came a decisive click. The sofa groaned as Charger rose. He approached the keypad and carefully clicked a few keys. The network had not detected any humans. Even his own form registered nothing.

"Piece of shit, can't even see me," snarled Charger. But this was to be expected, for he presented such a low profile of what humans considered life that he was the perfect stealth, all but invisible to detection.

The following two days found Charger again wandering the deserted streets, sometimes stopping in a coffee shop, and brewing a pot, sometimes entering a market and scrounging for food. On the second morning, Charger sat facing a small pond in the market square, tearing at a piece of raw meat that he'd taken from a freezer, when he was struck by an emotion.

It barely even registered in his mind at first, and it took a few moments before he realized that the emotion was loneliness. He had no idea how to react. Never, in all his nearly two hundred and fifty years, could he remember experiencing loneliness.

Charger sat for some time, trying to come to grips with the feeling, when it struck him that the feeling didn't belong to him. Somehow his brain had connected with a moment in his past, a lonely moment Jill experienced as she endured her bond with Charger's unemotional mind and Mac's confining oppression. Trapped between the two, Jill had been a lonely puppet dancing on frayed and twisted strings.

'I'm going to be a god,' Charger repeated. He heaved his great mass off the bench, retreating from the solitude of the pond, and returned to the city center hub. He programmed the computers with his task: take the seeds of life stored in his cargo ship, meant to be kept safe for the future, and use them.

Then he returned to the sofa, which complained bitterly at his great bulk. This time Charger slept, with long, fitful dreams of times past, where he was forced to count those he had killed as they walked slowly past him. Later he wandered the streets, eating, stopping here and there, sometimes sleeping in the alleyways like a hobo. A small computer module connected to his chest armor showed a progress bar as the main hub labored to complete the task Charger had set in motion. He checked it often.

Several years passed. He discovered an area away from the city, a place where crops were once grown to feed the city's masses. Trees and streams grew there now, and flowers bloomed, attempting to attract insects. Small animals scurried from under his feet. In the false sky an artificial replica of the sun burned Charger's armor and flesh every time he was exposed to its rays. Something in the light disagreed with his biomechanical armor.

He continued to program changes to the environment through his small computer interface, which the main hub carried out using drone Taskers. Sometimes it would rain in the agricultural area and Charger liked to be there when it did. Because he had armor, he hadn't used clothing since the conversion. Unable to shed the armor, he found the rain removed the pungent odor he always emitted.

The day finally came when the first artificially grown human was ready to enter consciousness. She was a young girl, the age Jill had been before her conversion to a Lycan and, for a moment, Charger felt a kind of bond. He stared at her perfect naked beauty for a few minutes as she slept, not yet fully revived and ready to enter this new world Charger had made.

His reverie was broken violently by alarms and flashing lights, momentarily sending him into a battle stance in anticipation of a fight. He frantically checked the computer monitors to find the cause of this chaos. What he found spurred the brand of fury that had always terrified others.

Deep in the bowels of the city, a strange program completed its designed task and a man stepped from the containment pod he had locked himself into some three hundred years before. A man so hated and despised for his actions during the wars that warrants for his arrest had been issued on all the inhabited worlds of that time. A bully and a tormentor who wielded power over others and sent millions to their deaths. A man who made the skin crawl with his very presence, the only being ever to rival Charger in fear generated and disgust created. General Harris, long thought dead, had hidden himself away in hopes that one day he could again try to control all of humanity.

He spent time adjusting his fake war medals on his chest and fixing his weapons to his belt. He stood now, free of his deep confinement below the surface of the city. With a few quick keystrokes on the computer, through an upload port on the side of his skull, he absorbed into his brain all the details of what had happened on the planet.

"Charger!" spat Harris. "I get to kill you after all." General Harris was considered the greatest mass murderer in the history of humanity, putting all previous historical figures to shame. He had cared only about winning the war, and to hell with the humans he condemned to their graves. Over six billion lives had been lost during the conflict, at least a billion or more due to General Harris's tactics.

Replacing the computer cable in the port to his skull with a wireless model, Harris began using the computer to plot the best strategies for defeating Charger and seizing the newly created humans. He needed an army to replace those he had used up. The next step he intended to take was to return to Earth and subdue humanity in preparation for the Grays to take over.

Two side tunnels and a staircase led him to a room where he emerged just behind Charger.

"Good, it seems you know I'm here. Then you will also know who it is that kills you," snarled Harris as he locked his weapon on active and energized a small portable blinding field. This made him invisible to Charger.

Charger was crossing the room that led to the lower areas when Harris came up behind him. Two short blasts from his weapon and a section of Charger's left arm was blasted away. Charger reeled from the impact, staggering, and turned to counter the attack. He could see nothing but a muzzle flash. Then part of his leg armor and enhancement shattered, bursting across the room. He staggered headlong into where the blast had originated, sweeping a great arc with his swords.

In an attempt to evade him, Harris lurched to the side, crashing into the wall, and damaging his blinding field generator. Now the field worked only intermittently, showing his position to Charger.

Like a bull elephant, Charger covered ground fast and struck Harris, causing him to slide backward across the room, and wrecking the weapon he had used on Charger. The blinding field became active again, and Harris quickly slipped from the room, heading in the direction Charger had come from. He emerged in the medical area used for creating new humans and saw a young girl.

Charger thrashed about, swinging blindly with his great swords, hoping to make contact, but finding nothing. Then his keen hearing caught the sound of Harris stumbling toward the medical area, loading a small arm weapon as he moved. Enraged, Charger pursued.

The young girl was waking and rising from the growth pod, while a small Tasker waited to clothe her, when Harris burst into the room. She screamed in terror as Harris grabbed her and forced a gun against her head. He waited for Charger to enter the room, while the girl struggled.

Charger was just outside the room and knew the only exit was through him. He stopped and yelled, "Come on, you bastard! Let's get this on."

The irate Harris ranted, "I know you're bleeding, I can smell your stench. You can't stop me. I'm taking what's mine, you freak, and I'm going to conquer Earth with the new army you made for me."

He's been in stasis, Charger thought. He doesn't know humanity has been destroyed and Earth is encased in iron.

Minutes passed and Harris realized that Charger was not coming into the room. Nervous, he switched tactics. "Join me! Together we can finish this, we can rule Earth together. Nobody can stop us if we team up!" A small bead of sweat formed on Harris's brow as he held the gun tight to the girl's head, choking her with his arm tight around her neck. "You better decide fast, or I'm going to kill this one, and then one more every minute you delay. I cannot be stopped!" A slight tremor shook him. "I'll count to three, then I'm killing this one and starting on the next! Hear me! I mean it. ONE!"

Charger opened the door.

Harris crowed in delight. "You can't kill me, anyway, Charger. You must obey me. I'm your creator."

Four yellowed fangs appeared at the corners of his mouth as Charger smiled. "But I'm good at math." Something else Harris didn't know; beginning on Mars long ago, Charger had broken the programming which demanded obedience from him.

His huge body occupied the full space of the door to the medical room as he stepped through it. Raising his blazing plasma sword in his good hand, without hesitation or emotion, Charger thrust it hard through the young girl's chest and deep into General Harris's body. The girl's eyes opened wide, and her screaming stopped.

Harris looked stunned and disbelieving. He stared into Charger's face, while his blood spilled down the back of the girl's clothing. His voice was almost a whisper as he asked, "What kind of monster are you?" Then he collapsed, taking the young girl down with him, as Charger released his hold on the handle of his embedded sword.

Charger stared down at the two dead bodies on the floor. He grabbed the handle of his sword and, placing a foot on the bodies for leverage, drew it out and holstered it. Turning from the room, he went in search of a cup of coffee.

More months passed as Charger made preparations for his people. He locked the city away from the agricultural area, sent all the remaining docked spaceships into deep space, and burned all weapons and historical recordings the old city contained. The computer and the drone Taskers created small villages, where they placed the new humans and the livestock needed to sustain them. More wildlife was added to the surrounding forests, and primitive tools were furnished.

Charger then destroyed the Taskers and wiped the computer systems, all but the basic code needed to sustain the villagers. He had retrieved the blinding field device from General Harris's body, repairing, reprogramming, and using it for himself so the villagers could not see him.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Did doing all that make Charger happy? Well, Reader, I don't think that's the right word to describe Charger. But I'd say he was content.

As the years rolled by, he wandered the forests and fields of the agricultural complex, observing the young people as they grew and the old as they died. A simple gas had been used to awaken the residents all at the same time so they could begin life unaware that other human races had existed before them, or that their ancestors had not always been here. They had been given the basic knowledge needed to produce goods and build societies. They spent their days sowing fields for crops, building homes for new families, and trading with neighboring villages.

One other thing that Charger had given these people was a false memory of tales told by their ancestors. He'd noticed that humans liked having ancestors because it gave them a feeling that they came from somewhere, that they had a history. They had no photographs, no mementos, no concrete evidence of their heritage, but they seemed content with the false memories which over time developed into complicated stories and myths. All was right and good and peaceful.

Like the stories I tell you? No, dear, my stories are true.

Occasionally Charger would return to the locked city to make sure the systems all functioned properly. One day he wandered into the room where the rotted corpses of the young girl and General Harris lay. Charger knelt down beside the young girl's remains and tenderly touched her decomposing hair. "I wish I could apologize for killing you, for killing all of you, but the apology would be a lie. I cannot feel sorrow for your death, or pity for your stolen life. I cared nothing for any of you. I was given a task: save humanity, and I was not allowed to fail in that quest, no matter what I had to do."

You're right, Reader, he does sound weary. But he's getting very old.

Charger never returned to that room. He went on roaming and, much to his own surprise, finally found friends he could talk to.



Charger was talking to his tiger. "It's been quite a few years now and I've found peace. I finally feel free. I even like to stop and listen to the birds. I've walked thousands of miles by just picking a direction and heading that way. And I haven't even found it necessary to count the miles. This world is seeing more and more diversity of life as the computers do their job. And, about a week back, I found a great dark shoreline beside fresh water, and I've been walking the beach ever since."

Charger could only travel in darkness. Something about the light from the artificial sun caused him to catch fire. "I have not run into a single human in the past month or so. I wonder if the city's programs are limiting their growth, or just placing them far enough apart so they learn to appreciate solitude."

The planet's temperature was always pleasant, but that made little difference to Charger. Being almost dead physically, he felt little need for warmth. He didn't bother building a shelter, preferring to rest under a large, shady tree during the daylight hours. He needed very little sleep. A skilled hunter, he killed wildlife only for sustenance. The blinding field he used never failed with humans. It didn't work with the animals, though.

"Not sure what the computer was doing when it created tigers. These big cats are as dumb as a sack of hammers. This one started following me about six months back and has been with me ever since. Makes it a bit difficult sometimes when I run into humans, but we get by. Got to admit that I like having someone to talk to." Charger sat down on a log washed up on the shoreline and stared off over the calm water.

"I miss the stars! But otherwise, this world is perfect," Charger said to his tiger. When he sat down, it came to his feet and sprawled out on the warm sand. "I'm guessing this beach can't go on forever. The world is, after all, inside out." He had even found the ability to laugh again, though it didn't happen often. He had grown old finally, after more than three hundred years and, surprisingly, being old was a comfortable thought.

The beach ended when Charger reached the entrance to the Valley of Shadows. The computer device he carried described the place as dark and oppressive. He thought he might like that. It took only a few more days of night travel before Charger found himself at the edge of a strange landscape. The trees were dead and rotten, the ground reddish in color, and the sun spread very little light in this area.

"Well, kitty, let's hope there's something in these woods to hunt. If not, I may be forced to eat you," Charger teased. The tiger gave a deep, low growl of disapproval. "Ha, yeah, like I'm afraid of you," Charger responded. The two traveled for some time deeper into the forest. Charger sensed that he and the cat were being watched; he even caught a glimpse of familiar gold-colored eyes reflecting back what little light there was in this place. He thought he could detect a familiar odor on the wind, too. Something in the back of his mind was stirring.

For a moment Charger felt concern for his little tiger friend. He looked down at it, then gave up his worry. "I guess a tiger could probably hold its own in a fight," he said, as he gave the beast a friendly pat on the head. The tiger hissed.

Just up ahead, Charger saw a faint shimmer of light. Curious, he walked toward it. He came out of the trees at the edge of a small town, very small compared to his great height. The town seemed deserted, but that made no sense since the place was clean and there were items around that looked recent. A water bucket, some food on a plate, freshly washed clothing.

"Something is wrong. My blinding field is working, so who was watching as we came out of the trees? If they can't see me, why do they seem to be hiding? Or is it you they're afraid of?"

Charger decided to sit in the middle of the town and wait for someone to appear. As he had no place to go, and didn't plan to die anytime soon, he felt he could outwait anyone who was hiding.

Six days had passed when a small creature opened a door and carefully stepped into the street. Charger had no idea that this small being was in fact a human boy from the period of the Mahoud survivors, evolved to dwarfism, a common fate for people trapped on islands back on old Earth. The boy spoke, but Charger had no idea what he said.

The tiger moved in to investigate the small being and Charger thought this might prove to be a bad thing. He picked up the complaining, clawing cat and placed it up high in a building. Then many small beings, apparently panicked, came running into the street. The small beings stood outside in the streets, talking excitedly, and tiger was inside the building, yowling to get out. "That worked out well," Charger thought.

He peered at the people. "Strange little cat-eyed human-looking things in brown robes. Boy, if my dad could see me now." He had not thought of his dad in many years and wondered if the old gas station had survived the war. Then he remembered. Nothing could have survived the iron shards.

Charger tried in vain to get the little people to understand what he was saying. After much frustration, he decided the tiger might be the barrier to conversation. It took him better than a week to lose the tiger outside the Valley of Shadows before he could return to the strange little people who were able to see him even with the blinding field active.

It took two years for Charger to understand the language of Mahoud; he was a slow learner when it came to words. "Good day, Ishtar, son of Imar, father of Gander." Charger spoke in a low tone so as not to offend the town's pub master. It was the practice to greet in such manner the people who provided food. "I return again for more of your gifted cooking; I mean well-prepared and delicious meals." Charger found the Mahoud language difficult to speak. So much of it depended on being nice and he still had a lot of work to do in that department.

"Welcome again, Charger, son of Dodge, of the town America, your speech is improving, and your tone impressive, but I still do not feel kindness in your approach. You have far to go. Sit, please. My wife and I prepared an exceptional meal for you today."

The one thing that these people did better than any other humans, anywhere, was cook. Their food was so good he always ate until his stomach hurt. And they always gave him plenty of meat.

"I wish we'd had your people around during the wars. Bet we could have ended things sooner using food instead of weapons. Come to think of it, I bet your cooking would have made a perfect weapon. As it was, the military thought I was a perfect weapon." Charger took the custom-built chair in the only area big enough to hold his great body.

"You still speak of weapons and wars, which is very sad. My wife and I hope for the day that this too will pass," Ishtar said, as he placed a huge bowl of hot food in front of Charger.

Charger began to gorge, then stopped, realizing he forgotten courtesy yet again. "Many thanks for the kindness; I apologize again for eating before thanking."

Ishtar responded kindly. "It's fine, my new friend. It has only been a few hundred days since your arrival, and we can be patient till you learn."

Charger was comfortable around these little people because they were so kind. Though he lived with them for many years, he often left the town for long periods. He had to return to the locked city to ensure that the computer programs he had set in motion were still operating within his defined parameters. And, for all the many times Charger returned and observed the little

people having families and the children growing, he never knew that they were the keepers of an incredible power that was tied to his own fate: the god fragment that had long ago been brought back from the center of the galaxy. But Charger kept a secret, too. He never told them that their ancestral city remained, and that he had access to it.

The little boy who first appeared to Charger when he had arrived in the town had grown to be a fine young man, always looking for adventure. One day, he approached Charger and asked for a favor. "It wouldn't be too difficult for someone like you, and it would mean so much to our people if I could surprise them with this gift. With your help of course." Mestas used a pleading manner as was customary when asking for help.

"Of course," Charger responded, though he realized the task would not be easy. "We can set off tomorrow if you like. The sooner we start; the sooner we get it done."

Mestas was pleased with his friend's willingness to help. The statue of Visha had sunk in the great body of water and thought lost forever. If Charger could find it and bring it to the town, they could place it at the center of the square for all to celebrate.

Visha had been the one responsible for guiding the Nine of Nines and the continent of Mahoud to this world. His name was revered as the greatest of the Nines ever to have lived. Thus, the people of Mahoud had built a statue and a temple to him on an island in the middle of the lake, but poor soil conditions and magnetic forces from the city's old antigravity drive caused it to sink beneath the surface. The lake had been built by Taskers, with ice mined from asteroids.

"What does it mean, 'the sooner we start the sooner we get it done'?" Mestas asked Charger. The two were packed and ready for the task ahead.

"It's an old Earth expression. Every trip starts with the first step. Or, why put off till tomorrow what you can do today," replied Charger, sure this would explain things.

"That makes no sense. One can only start when one is able to. Is this not true on Earth?" Mestas asked again as the two set off down the trail to the great body of water.

"Well, on Earth, we use this saying as a way to motivate an individual to do what he says he is going to do." Charger hoped his explanation was clearer this time.

"But by saying you're going to do something, of course you're going to do it. Why do the people of Earth need to be encouraged to do what they already said they were going to do?" Mestas asked again.

Charger was getting irritated and slipped back into his old ways of dealing with matters. "The people of Earth are stupid, and rarely make sense. That is the order of things there!" Charger added a ferocious look to ensure the conversation was over.

Mestas dropped the topic immediately. They did not speak again until they reached the lake. Mestas never even asked why Charger was carrying a large barrel on his back. The barrel had been used by the townspeople to hold grain. It was large and watertight, a container that Charger felt he could make into a submersible.

Since Charger had no idea what the Visha statue looked like or where it was, he needed Mestas to go underwater too. They spent a few days on the shores of the lake, while Charger cut small porthole windows for Mestas to look through, using clear glass dinner plates. He sealed the portholes with sticky tree resin and added several large rocks as weights. He tested the device several times and, finally convinced that it worked, suggested they would try their first descent next day. Mestas did not seem convinced.

"I once saw a guy do this in a movie back on Earth. His head popped like a balloon and there was blood everywhere," Charger told Mestas as they prepared to enter the water. Mestas looked terrified. "Ah, I'm just kidding you, everything will be fine," Charger added, with a laugh.

"I do not understand. Nor do I think I like Earth humor much," Mestas stuttered nervously.

The underwater world was breathtaking; there were ancient relics and thousands of small colored fish so bright they almost hurt the eyes. The beauty of the life in this body of water was as diverse as it had been back on old Earth, and the water was warm and clear no matter what depths they plumbed.

The first day was a short-lived bust. Mestas found that there was breathable air for only a limited time under water, and Charger was a little embarrassed by not having considered this. With Mestas pounding frantically on the small portholes, Charger surfaced the small craft.

The next few days were better as the two ventured farther out and deeper down in short jaunts, searching for the important relic. Farther out and deeper down still until, finally, just poking out of the sand and small pebbles on the bottom, they saw a raised hand. It was Visha, his statue buried deep. They were very proud of their accomplishment when they got it back to shore, and small Mestas danced a dance of great joy well into the night as their small campfire burned warm and bright.

Charger discovered, that although he might be nearly dead by most medical standards, he was still capable of getting drunk. The town celebrated the gift of Visha's statue and small Mestas had thought it a good idea to share with Charger the spirits his people made. On the following morning, the consequences were apparent in Charger's inability to see clearly. His great mass and body size made for a lot of excitement as he rose, staggered about and broke things, much to the amusement of the townsfolk.



One of Charger's ongoing tasks in his old age was the maintenance and reprogramming of the city's computers. He had to update and guide the development of the world's habitable conditions. He had chosen not to interfere with its human development, instead letting random acts of computer programming develop their adaptation to life.

He seemed now just a frail old man with only memories for companionship. His armor no longer healed him if he was hurt, and his mechanical enhancements were corroded so badly that he walked with a limp. His blinding field often failed him, as did his cognitive capabilities. The village of the Valley of Shadows faded in memory. The people he once knew had died and their children had grown up and started families of their own, so he didn't bother visiting anymore.

As Charger entered the locked city, he wondered if this might be the last time he did so, the last time he would have to fight with the computers. The huge doors creaked open, revealing pathways he had traversed many times before, and hallways that led deep inside the city. Delicious odors struck his nostrils, for he had programmed the computers, upon his arrival, to start a pot of coffee and make doughnuts, simple pleasures he enjoyed.

After passing through several rooms and climbing many stairs, he once again passed the room where the mummified bodies of General Harris and the young girl still lay on the floor. "Not far now," he thought, "and I will be back where I started." It seemed to him that every time he returned, the hallways were longer, but he suspected this was just old age getting the better of his imagination.

As he entered the main computer center, a computer voice welcomed him back to the room. "It is good to see you again, programmer."

"It's Charger, you stupid hunk of shit, how many times do I have to tell you that?" Charger growled.

"As per your last commands, all executable files have been activated. The biosphere is stable and animal populations are on the increase in several sectors, all is within the defined parameters, programmer." The computer voice sounded much as a telephone recording might.

Rapping his old knuckles firmly on the surface of the computer's keypad, Charger responded, "Hey, stupid, it's Charger, not programmer, not mister, not sir, just Charger. I thought you were supposed to be smart?"

"Command unclear," replied the computer voice. "Please restate request."

"Stupid piece of human crap; no wonder humans all got killed," grumbled Charger as he lowered his huge old frame down onto a large chair.

"Command unclear, please restate request," repeated the computer voice.

"All right, don't get your panties in a bunch. Give me the readout on the human populations." Charger wanted to get this done as fast as possible.

"Human populations stable and thriving in all zones except for the one labeled Mexca. Mexca population is accelerating beyond controllable parameters. Resources will be exhausted in three to four years of planet rotation. Expected outcome: strife and conflict."

Age leads many to wisdom, but excessive age, like Charger's more than three hundred years, was not his friend. This simple condition of population growth was destabilizing the delicate balance of Neo Terra, and Charger's response to this was unintentionally devastating to those he held dear. "What, so you're telling me that the Mexca peoples are humping like bunnies?" Charger said jokingly.

"Command unclear, please restate request," responded the voice with its usual aggravating response.

Speaking slowly and deliberately, Charger asked, "Are the people of Mexca over-populating?"

"Yes," responded the voice.

"Well, stupid, reduce the population quickly," snapped Charger impatiently.

With that simple command, the computer set about creating the conditions needed to reduce the population quickly. Charger thought a slow reduction would take place, for the computer mentioned three to four years.

What happened instead was the rise of the "mad ones," a program of cannibalism meant to rapidly reduce the population and maintain planet stability. The consequences were dire for the Valley of Shadows inhabitants for, when the people of Mexca cast out the vile human cannibals, they wandered starving only until discovering Mestas' people.

Charger eventually came to discover the mistake he had made. In his attempt to do the right thing, he had again created chaos and destruction. Weeks later, after leaving the city and making his way back to the Valley of Shadows, he stood in the center of the small town, able to feel only anger, not sorrow, surrounded by the dead and dying.

Is it the destiny of humanity to create chaos everywhere they try to create order? When faced with order, when things are at their best, do they instinctively feel the need to create disorder? Charger had once been Henry, who worked at his father's gas station, and was always willing to help others, always ready to give of himself. Then he was drawn into war with an enemy he did not know or understand, but who turned out to be human. Now he stood surrounded by the skeletons of people who had taken him into their homes and given him a moment's peace from all the torment his long life had thrust upon him.

He was completely broken now. He walked away from the town, never turning to look back. He no longer even had the power to turn on his blinding field. He was a shadow of what

remained of the old world, a wraith of humanity's greatest triumph and its greatest disaster.

Charger had come to understand from the survivors that these good people faced a group of ravenous cannibals that he had helped to create. He walked for months, never stopping, never eating, never sleeping, until one day, exhausted and with his feet bleeding, he sat down beneath a great oak tree between a forest hill and a green field of grain below.

There he sat, looking at all the wonders of this inside-out world, with a small dog keeping him company. The dog was out of place and seemed sometimes not so much a dog as something else. Whatever it might be, the dog was the companion Charger needed. He had completed his mission: protect humanity and give the peoples of Earth a fighting chance. Humanity had created him because they needed him, needed a monster. He did what they could not, and they had feared and despised him for it.

Now he intended to leave it all behind.

Chapter 11 Dart speaks to Reader

Yes, Reader, the cannibals were horrible. No, Charger didn't stop them; he was too afraid that if he tried to fix the problem, he'd end up doing even worse damage.

But don't worry about the cannibals. As Charger had designed them to do, the humans exercised logic and took care of the problem themselves. The peoples of Mexca, Canda, and Hamerca got together and organized groups of hunters and a few fast young runners who were willing to act as the bait.

More deaths? Yes, a few more of the little people who lived in the Valley of Shadows were lost, but finally "the mad ones" were all killed.

Humanity learned a valuable lesson from this tragedy. These humans created by Charger had no understanding of their true heritage; they were as fresh to life as newborn children. They had been truly innocent, exploring and interacting in harmony with the environment, so much so that they hadn't even considered the ramifications of over-populating. The horror of the cannibals taught them to be careful how much they took from a giving planet.

That's why Charger gave them free will. Once they understood the logic of environmental supply and demand, they easily made the decision to limit the number of children born.

Oh, and Charger did something else interesting when he created the new humans on Neo Terra. He made their physical characteristics a combination of all the various types which had lived on Earth. Neo Terrans are generally slim, like most Asians, and rarely tall. They have light brown skin and usually brown or black hair, and brown eyes.

You'd rather have green eyes and blonde hair? Well, sometimes the DNA combinations will throw out a redhead, or somebody with blue eyes, say. Charger didn't do a perfect job of meddling. A good thing, I think. It would be too boring to have everybody exactly the same.

Now I want to tell you about the small Gray alien which followed Charger's ship partway to Neo Terra, then changed direction and followed the Grays' battle fleet to Earth when they destroyed what was left of humanity.

No, this lone Gray didn't go home again when the last battle was over. It actually found its way to Neo Terra.

The Gray had no idea where Charger in his lone ship had gone, but it decided to remain behind after the final destruction of humanity and try to find the missing ship. As far as its superiors were concerned, even a single human left alive was one too many. The ship was primitive and slow and the Gray thought it should be easy to find again. But space is vast and such a small target traveling in a random fashion made this task all but impossible.

The Gray spent thirty years traveling the stars before the instruments carried by its ship sensed a faint power source emanating from a rogue black world drifting through space. Curious, it decided to investigate. It discovered the entrance into Neo Terra.

It found the strange, primitive little Earth ship disassembled and devoid of life, and a deserted city. The technology of the city was also primitive, and completely unaware of the small Gray's presence as it wandered the streets and alleys of this dark and forgotten city. Using advanced technologies, it found its way to the doors that opened out into the agricultural area.

The Gray was shocked. Humanity had not been destroyed. In fact, it was thriving.

You think this was a very bad thing to happen? You may be right, Reader.

Chapter 12 Charger in flames

Charger sat under the massive oak tree, his armor cracked and bleeding from small wounds. The left ear had been snagged by a bullet long ago, losing its tip. Long gray hair, growing in patches from the misshapen skull, straggled in thin whips across his battered, scarred, and flattened face. One milky white eye was half-closed. Little flames flared up on his armor as the sun reached it through the leaves. He rocked back and forth, mumbling, a little insane now. But sane enough that he wanted to die.

And why should he not? It was now 2365 and he was well over three hundred years old. Yet when he glanced up, he saw in the distance a young, handsome, powerful man who seemed to be himself. Himself in memory, no doubt.

He sat next to a little rag of a dog, with three little rags of pups asleep nearby, on a hill overlooking fields of corn and potatoes below, while the damp morning dew seeped through cracks in his armor. "It wasn't always like this," he said to the dog. He waved a hand to encompass the whole area, lush and green. Then he pulled his knees up to his chest and rocked forward, taking a breath of the fresh air, smelling it, tasting it.

Charger looked down into the attentive brown eyes of the heavily matted, long-haired mutt and wondered when it had last eaten. Where had it come from? Its ribs were showing, and its legs wobbled, but the tail wagged whenever he spoke to it. Reaching into his pack, he pulled out some dried meat and shared a meal with his new friend. The dog eagerly wolfed down the scraps.

The sky was reddish-gray, typical for a planet that had undergone several years of heavy nuclear bombardment. After a moment, he knew that thought wasn't right. He blinked to clear his vision. No, that was Earth he was remembering, long ago during the Mahoud-Earth War. He was on Neo Terra now, with the new humans.

He reached down and scratched the dog's ears. It was lying next to him, patiently listening as they chatted away the morning. "That was a long time ago," he said. "When I was young."

He was different now, aged and heavily scarred. He hated the milky white eyes that reflected the image of anything he stared at. Then there were those four damn fangs in the corners of his mouth, always scraping at his tongue and making speech difficult. He'd never got used to being called a vampire by the civilians, but what had been done to him was what his species had needed to do to survive.

Something wrong with that statement, too. Charger shook his head. No, not his species. He wasn't human anymore. Didn't want to be, either.

Many soldiers had been converted to look like those blood-sucking ghouls of mythology. They were able to fight in the dark and they were stronger, faster, and less likely to be killed by the poison mist of the invaders. Their hideous biological metallic body armor was designed to keep them safe, to heal them when hurt.

"I remember how we wrenched the limbs from alien bodies during those battles I enjoyed," he mumbled. It had been in the third and last year of the war and most of Earth's resources were gone. Very little food and water remained and, with the loss of five billion humans over two years, most soldiers believed the fight was lost. They could kill aliens, but it seemed impossible to defeat them. Most civilians were forced to relocate to the frozen wastes of the north and south polar regions.

It was a scientist named Darwin, Charger guessed, who first hit on the idea of converting

soldiers to Hyborgs, or vampires, as they became known soon after the conversion. "It was funny, from human evolution to the undead seemed so wrong." Reaching into his pack he pulled out a vial. He still had to drink a red plasma because he couldn't produce his own blood cells. Humans had willingly donated their precious fluids to keep the new soldiers strong, so the fight could continue.

But that was long ago. The others were all dead. Ten thousand, four hundred and sixty-one. Or had it been sixty-two? He wasn't sure; he'd lost his edge. But there was only him now.

He pressed his back against the gnarled trunk of the old tree. The war was over and nothing good had come of it. "We never knew why the invaders chose to kill all plant life and human life on Earth. Some speculated that it was necessary for their survival, but that doesn't seem right either. We must have killed millions of them."

The dog had closed its eyes and seemed to sleep, relaxed by the story and maybe tired of hiding and scrounging to keep alive. Dogs could sense aliens, but the military only realized that when it was too late.

Many from Charger's division became vampires during the war, but they always feared sunlight, for ultraviolet rays were deadly to them. If they had only known that dogs could find the tunneling masses of alien life, moving beneath their feet, aliens that killed so many children, women, and men, they might never have had to change, to become so different, to become vampires.

Looking up, Charger was grateful for the light gray color of the distant sky. Except for the sun, he didn't mind daytime; it made him feel almost human. He shook his head, dispelling that thought. He didn't want to be human.

"It felt good to kill aliens. I was protecting my home and I felt strong and invincible. We all did. After a time, we ditched our guns, because the sword was king again. Holding the straight steel in your hand, swinging it back and forth, hacking the invaders. Well, it saved a lot on lead; we didn't need bullets."

Once they knew that dogs could sense the invaders, the experiments creating hybrids ramped up again. Monstrous beasts of dogs began to emerge from surviving science labs all over the world. Then the inevitable happened: The Lycanthrope, half human, half dog, and all bad. The aliens feared these and so did the remaining humans, with good cause.

Heat radiated from his sleeping companion, its breathing regular and its heart beating steadily as it slept. Charger felt cold and dead. Time to finish it.

An old familiar thought again surfaced. Did she survive? He'd had no way to know. Did it matter? He guessed not but, if she were alive, what would she think of him?

No, she couldn't be alive. Not now. Not all these years later.

Their bodies were massive, twice the size of ordinary men. People in the small towns that escaped destruction called them devils. The humans gave food and blood so willingly, the cowards! He hated them, always asking the Hyborgs to hunt down and kill the remaining Lycans.

"I really liked dogs. It was always hard to kill the Lycans; they were good fighters." He laughed, though it wasn't really a laugh anymore, but kind of a grunt and a hiss mixed. His life seemed funny to him now, a mechanic who was a vampire, with werewolf allies, fighting aliens from a distant solar system. It was such B-movie material.

They thought going digital would make Earth quieter, harder to find. But was there some human who knew the aliens were out there? Was that why Earth went quiet? He hadn't thought about that for a long time.

He'd always believed life in the universe would be rare, and even if there were other beings, how would they ever meet? Like an exploding hand grenade, planets were flying apart, and the idea of other life in the universe traveling great distances to find Earth seemed impossible. That's what was shown on televisions every night way back, but wow...were they wrong!

No shrink could hope to understand the joy he'd felt at being the perfect weapon for vengeance, or the high he felt as he snuffed the life from an enemy combatant. Many people over the years told him how disturbed he was, how dangerous he was.

But he'd been a hero back then. He'd saved so many lives of so many pointless humans. What had they ever done that required such a sacrifice?

"You would have hated becoming a Lycan, and if you did, I would have had to kill you, too." The thought made him sad as he shifted closer to his new furry friend.

The dog seemed so small, hard to believe it was a German shepherd. To Charger, in his huge Hyborg form it hardly seemed the size of a Yorkie. "Did I tell you about Dal?" he asked the dog. It yawned, stretched, and curled back into a ball but it looked up, waiting to hear more of the story.

Dal said, "Remember, no matter what we become, no matter where we're sent to fight, we have a responsibility. We can't let these squishy bastards have our home."

"Damn straight," Charger had answered. "We're takin' these superpowers to the max and I ain't stopping till all the squishies have been squashed." The liquor that night was coursing through his veins in high amounts as he and Dal stared into the dark sky. "Then we get rockets, and we go a-squishing on their home planet," he slurred. The drink was hitting hard now, his eyelids growing heavy.

"Don't let me fall," Dal said. "I want to get to the rockets part too, and fight on their world. Promise you won't let me fall," Dal pleaded. "We can never die if we stick together."

Charger turned to Dal and the words stumbled from his mouth. "I promise, we'll go squishing squishy-town together, Dal, you and me. I won't let you fall."

"We know how that turned out," Charger said to the dog. "Dal died. And I'm a wreck of a thing now, confused and old, with no one to talk to anymore."

He didn't think he could do it; he couldn't kill this dog. Charger's head sagged low toward his chest, and the dog placed its matted, scruffy head on his bent legs and whined quietly. The sound seemed to echo something that was happening in his own mind.

The day was getting brighter and the dew seeping through his armor was drying now. Stretching back against the tree, Charger gently ran his hand down the dog's body, feeling its warmth and its ribs through the mats and burrs.

The aliens wore envelopes of some kind of liquid stuff. It was weird; the envelope covered their entire bodies. He hadn't been able to tell what was real and what wasn't. And they had the most incredible machines for digging and for grabbing people. It was surprising to everybody that the military could actually destroy any of them.

"Television made me believe they were so advanced we'd all be crushed. But I don't think the aliens really understood who they pissed off."

Behind the front lines, far to the rear, the aliens consumed, in the most horrific manner, all the plant life. No one knew whether this was because plants were food or fuel for them, or a method of starving the planet of air.

"Rin Tin Tin," he said to the dog, "that's what I'll call you, like in the book." That prompted another yawn and stretch. "Wow, what an exciting dog you are!" He could feel a blink of sunlight poke through the gray sky and pierce the foliage of the tree he sat under. For a brief

second, sunlight touched him. And it hurt.

"You could have been a Lycan too, Rin Tin Tin," he said softly, not wanting to wake his sleeping dog. More and more now, the morning sun warmed the gray sky. More and more light filtered between the leaves to find its way to his blackened skin, more and more small fires erupted on his body and then burnt out as the shade passed back over him.

"I'm tired now. It's been a good life, killed lots of squishies. Sometimes wish they were still here, shouldn't have killed them so fast, I guess." He glanced up into the tree. "See, there on that branch? A thousand and seventeen leaves on that branch. But who cares about that anymore?"

What was this feeling of emptiness? Trained to do only one thing, he'd had a purpose and it had been clear who was the enemy. Now he spent his days wandering around in a fog of memories, and there was no one left who could understand what he had experienced.

He looked down at a patch of skin that was on fire and snuffed out the flame. His living armor was old now, pitted and scarred, and the left leg enhancements failed him often so that he walked with a limp. Part of his left arm was gone, and the shoulder plating was cracked and often bled. His combat unit's fighting insignias were all faded and mostly covered with the blood of many kills. "I don't think the scientists knew when they converted us that we would live so long. Guess they expected us all to die in battle. Sure, that's what General Harris wanted."

Three hundred and twenty-eight years of life, of day-in and day-out boredom. Most of it, anyway.

"When Dal and I joined, I was twenty. I've seen burned out cities and towns recover from the invasion, but all from a distance. Over three hundred years of talking to myself. I want it to end."

The morning gave way to afternoon as Charger's new dog friend rose to all four feet, wagged its tail, stared intently at him, and whined. He flung his long gray hair back and stared at the dog. Its gaze was now fixed on Charger's leg, and he looked down. There was quite a fire burning on that leg. Funny he never noticed. When he moved it into the shade, the flames died down.

"You think I should move out of the light, I guess," he said to Rin Tin Tin. "It's nice that you care, but look around, the sun has burned off all the clouds now and I have no hope of escape. Kind of how the Shillelaghs must have felt after my upgrade. We destroyed all of them, you know. Bet the aliens didn't expect that."

He reached down to pet Rin Tin Tin, hoping that remembering this event would somehow justify his kills. The dog didn't seem to care.

"It's two hundred and thirty-five years ago to the day since I had to kill Mac," Charger said to Rin Tin Tin. Leaning forward to find some new shade, he felt his long gray hair catch on some tree bark. It fell away easily now from his head. Hardly seemed reasonable to keep it long because so much fell out every day.

"I really like dogs; did I mention that?" he asked. A pause. "You do know that I will have to end your life today, don't you? Those pups, too. You should have died two hundred and thirty years ago, when the rest of them did." He wanted to hold the small scrap of a dog close to him, to feel its warmth, and enjoy the wetness of its tongue licking his cheek. But the years had been so long maybe he couldn't feel much of anything.

It had been decreed back then that all dogs be put down because the risk of Lycan offspring was just too great, and the best part of all humanity would have to carry that burden. He really hated humans then.

He found more meat in his pack, gave it to the dog and said, "There, there now, let me tell

you a bit more about Mac and Jill, we've got time. All day in fact." He sighed, scratched the dog's ears, and talked on.

"We did win in the end," he said, after another string of war stories. "Our fighting forces were every bit a match for the alien invaders. And we did go to squishy town." It had taken seven years to build ships capable of traveling to that world.

"Humanity scavenged the alien ships and deconstructed them, then reconstructed the hulks," he said to the dog. He'd gone on one of the ships, taking some of Dal's armor, and Chang's, even Ben's stuff, along with Mac and Jill.

The dog was still listening. "Their world is so different," Charger said. "It's this one, you know, this one we're on. The planet's surface was black, like our moon, pitted and wrecked, and astronomers would never have thought to look for life on such a world. We thought we were in the wrong place, that this couldn't be their home, that the calculations used to determine their point of origin were flawed." The idea that advanced life could be so close to Earth had been mind-numbing.

"Then one of our ships discovered the entrance. They lived deep underground, they lived inside out," he explained. "Take Earth and turn it inside out and you'd get this one. They lived on the inside of their world, and it was green and lush, not like in the movies where mole people live in drab holes. Inside their planet were big, vibrant green spaces. Well, there still are, because of that fake sun up there. This is where the new humans live."

Charger stared at the dog. "But how did you get here? I thought you were all dead."

The trip to the alien world had been a relatively brief one, a few years. And when they'd landed and looked around, there was nobody. "Then Command figured out that every last alien on Neo Terra had gone to do battle with Earth. Except they never found out about the Valley of Shadows; they never found the little people." He shook his head. "I guess they're human, but they're different. They're peaceful. So they can't be human."

"I really hate humans," he said again. "The aliens' technology was far in advance of our own, yet familiar. That's because they were us. Not aliens at all. I guess if I'd known that, I wouldn't have been able to kill them."

A vine from the tree they rested under brushed against Charger's side and he shoved it away. The grass was turning wet again, the day was slipping back toward night.

"Jill sensed what was going to happen, you know. A hundred years of joined minds can do that. Mac grew old fast. When the order came down to kill all Lycans, Mac acted like he welcomed it. He went quietly at my hands, looking almost relieved. He had destroyed so many of the aliens that when he learned who they were, it seemed to wrench his spirit from him. Jill fought me at first, then resigned herself." In the end, he'd been responsible for the destruction of all the vampires and Lycans.

Charger brushed another vine away and shifted over to avoid the fading sunlight. A fire on his shoulder vanished with the move. He remembered the last thing Ben had said just before they engaged in the battle. "Fair dinkum, mate, remember, if you can't kill 'em, ask them to dinner, we can cook 'em over the barby then." He figured that was Australian talk for kill everything not human. Well, he'd been doing that for a long time. Except that the ones he killed always turned out to be human.

But tonight would be different. Tonight would be the end of him. Come the dawn, he would be no more.

He pulled the vial from his pack and drank the last of the plasma, then shared the last of his meat with Rin Tin Tin, and stood up. "I spare your life, dog," he said. "But mine is at an end."

Release will be sweet."

He stepped into the fading light and his body burst into flames. He didn't feel pain; he was only annoyed by the fact that yet again, he had scraped his tongue on the broken fang. As the smoke rose, so did Rin Tin Tin.

The last thing Charger saw was the young, powerful man he had been so long ago, walking toward him. Maybe that was his death, he thought. When they merged, it would be over. He took a couple more steps towards his young double and spoke.

The dog watched as Charger's massive body began to burn. Under the coolness of the leafy oak they had shared, it stood, shielding its pups from drifting smoke. Then, satisfied, the dog trotted into the forest.

Chapter 13 The magic city

Deleray went out late one summer afternoon, the year she turned twelve, to pick flowers. She wanted to put them in a small copper jug on the table where the family ate their meals. By the time she reached the corn fields, she had enough flowers for the jug. As she turned to head back, she glanced up and saw, high on the opposite hill, in the shadows of a large oak tree, a man sitting with an animal. Deleray stared; she had never seen the man before. The animal was strange, too.

Then the man rose, and she realized he was huge. Her mouth fell open in amazement as he burst into flames which burned brighter than the morning sun. Terrified, she raced back to the village and told the elders. When they climbed the hill, they found a great black demon lying dead in the grass near the oak tree, burn marks on much of his body.

That night, sitting around the hearth in the village hall, the elders wove a new story, one about demons living in the forest, a tale to frighten the young into obedience.



Six years later, on the morning of her eighteenth birthday, Deleray rose very early, for the people of her village staged extravagant celebrations for all children who reached this threshold to the adult world.

She was highly favored among the villagers because she had spent countless hours reciting the history of their people and the important achievements of their heroes, just as she had heard those stories from the elders. Long had been the existence of the Kung families, so the tales went, tracing their ancestry back fifty generations to the time of the great king Asmos, whose direct descendants still lived in villages some two days ride away by horse and cart. She had once asked why there were no drawings of the people long gone, no diaries or relics. The elders shook their heads and said that such things were frivolous, that the long-established custom of reciting oral histories was all they needed.

Telling stories in the evening brought Deleray the most praise. She would gather the children around the central hearth in the village hall and tell them about the day she witnessed the great god Haspha burst into flames under the tall oak tree.

Now, on this celebration day, Deleray braided her thick, lustrous black hair and wound it in a crown on top of her head. Then she dressed in her finest leather riding gear, for now that she was eighteen, she was expected to ride the great horses. These were horses twice the size of the ordinary field horses and had been ridden into many historic battles. During these days of peace, they were ridden only by children who had come of age.

Deleray was very excited, for she had picked her birthday horse some three years back and, though she fed and cared for the great stallion, was not allowed until this morning to ride the huge beast. From her small bedroom on the top floor, she raced down the stairs past her younger brother, knocking him off his feet.

"Hey, you big lumbering bear, look where you put your feet!" Oppsy complained.

"Oh, you will surely live to steal my stuff tomorrow," Deleray replied cheerfully, hurrying past her mother on the way to the back door.

"Now, young lady, an apology is due, and if you wish not to offend Haspha, you'll be quick about it," her mother said, catching Deleray by the arm.

Stopped just short of escape, Deleray turned back to face her younger brother. "I am the most apologetic of people for my offence. Please forgive my transgressions." She bowed her head low, then lifted it slightly and winked at Oppsy.

"Very nice, Del," her mother said.

To which Oppsy cried, "Hey, mom, she winked an eye at me." However, his words were too late, for Deleray had made her escape out the back door and was hurrying to the center of town for the celebrations.

She shared this birthday with five other kids from the village. Demm was a tall, lean young man, not very bright, but good at sports. Deleray really liked him because of his long, shining black hair. Hers was black, too, but thick and curly and, no matter what she tried, she couldn't get it to look smooth like his. Bosh and Dwain were twins, boys always in trouble for raiding gardens. They were heavysset and dark-skinned, with fat bellies often full of stolen vegetables. Jalen and Chloe were cousins, pretty and competitive girls, each trying to gain something the other did not have at the expense of any boy who found them attractive.

These six young scamps gathered at the village oak tree on the hill just outside the town. This was the same tree where Deleray had witnessed the vision of the great god Haspha. As was customary, most of the village people were there. Many long-winded speeches were made, telling of the lineage and long ancestry of the villages of Hamerca, and how the great king Asmos conquered the tribes of Mexca and Canda, forever binding the peoples to live in peace and harmony.

After what felt like hours of talk and ceremonial feasting, the six were presented with their horses, which they had spent three years training and grooming. Deleray could hardly wait for the best part of the celebration. The six were to ride out from the village and spend a week in the forests, exploring where no one else had traveled before. Finally, as the sun burned at its midday brightest, the six riders mounted their horses and, to the cheers of family and other well-wishers, set off.

The adventure was a bit chaotic at first for every one of the group wanted to lead, and all in different directions, naturally.

After much complaining and arguing, Deleray said softly, "I know an old story, told by the peoples of Canda, about a place where a magical waterfall exists, though now the water is fouled by poison so we cannot drink it. But the water still feeds a wondrous garden which grows the tallest trees ever seen."

"Garden," Bosh said to Dwain. "I say we go there."

"Yes, never let it be said that we pass up any opportunity to garden," responded Dwain, rubbing his belly.

Because Demm liked Deleray, that made the vote four in favor, and the six set off in the direction Deleray had suggested. The goal was distant, and they spent three days riding across the open plains of Saturne toward the smaller forest of Bell.

The people of the Bell Forest were called Canda and differed from Deleray's people of Hamerca only in being slightly taller. They also had a reputation for being kind and generous. The small troop rode into the village, acknowledging many greetings from the locals, as they made their way to the local market for breakfast and supplies. After eating well, Jalen and Chloe trotted off to a shop that offered trinkets for purchase. There they met an old, gray-haired man with a funny accent.

"Here, I have many things for pretty girls. Over here, this is the best stuff," the old man said as he directed to two cousins to a corner of his shop.

Chloe found a small, rectangular metal object with colored stones scattered across its face. They sparkled and shone, and she found it irresistible.

"Ah, that's a good buy," the old man said. "I found it some ten years back, not a day less. I decided it be magic, though others think it be black magic. 'Twas at the falls that it glowed and warmed, near shocked me to my grave, too." As the old man spoke, he rummaged through his wares looking for something to sell Jalen, but she seemed little interested and went on fingering this and that.

"The falls?" Chloe asked. "Do you mean the poisoned falls?"

"Bah, fools! They be not poison falls like people say," the old man said, still pulling objects from shelves here and there, hoping to entice Jalen into buying something. "The place is different, is all. The trees grow large and that be scary to the daft."

Jalen finally found an object that caught her fancy, as Dwain entered the shop looking for the two girls. "Here, look at this, I like this," she said to Dwain sweetly. "Be a dear and buy it for me. I would be so happy."

Dwain was quite taken with Jalen's attention and soon parted with his money to buy the object for Jalen. As it turned out, this object was almost identical to the one Chloe had bought, and both were a little annoyed.

With their bellies, packs, and saddlebags full and their wallets empty, the troop of six gathered near the edge of town. "The stories say the falls are toward the Dark Side. If we ride all day, we should reach them by tonight," Deleray told the group.

On the world of Neo Terra, there was no such thing as north or south, east or west; there were instead points of darkness on the world's horizons. No one ever ventured too close to the darkness, for the elders said the world ended there and you would certainly die if you got too close. It was also said that you would have to ride for better than a year to reach the darkness. No one believed that it was even possible to ride so far.

Neo Terra's darkness had four corners to it, however, something like the point of a compass. They were: Dark Side, Gray, Black Shore, and the most dreaded destination, the Valley of Shadows. No adventurer had thus far been brave enough to attempt a quest into the Valley of Shadows, because of the stories of beasts that ruled that land, although one myth said a small group of mad ones had traveled there once upon a time.

The troop rode, as Deleray instructed, for a full day and, by nightfall reached the edge of a small plain. Across the plain lay their destination. They would camp for the night and cross in the morning. Tents were pitched and the group fell asleep after Deleray told her usual scary stories over a campfire.



The day started out wet and misty as usual. The plants were refreshed and the world clean when the sun started to shine on the awakening kids. Bosh was washing his pot belly behind his tent when Chloe, half asleep and looking for a quiet place of her own to wash, almost stumbled over him. "Gross!" Chloe said in a long-drawn-out breath, as she averted her eyes from the sight of Bosh with his wet rag.

Glad of a chance to pester Chloe, Bosh rubbed his belly hard with the rag, then rubbed his face.

"Ah, grossity! I'm gonna puke," Chloe said, then giggled. She really liked Bosh but didn't want to let on.

Demm had restarted the fire from the night before and the troop gathered around its warmth to eat breakfast. Bosh kept up his antics, sitting next to Chloe with his wash rag now cleverly wrapped around his head.

"Gross. Go away!" Chloe pushed at Bosh.

The six laughed and talked for an hour, packed their gear, and finally set off across the small flat plain. By midday they were deep among the trees, listening to small birds and insects celebrating the peaceful forest. They rode along an ancient, almost invisible path, and finally reached the legendary falls. The sight was impressive and beautiful, and the trees really were tall enough to touch the sky.

"Now remember, no matter what, don't drink the fall's water," Deleray cautioned the others.

"We know, mommy," they said in unison, followed by much giggling. They had only one day to explore this magical place, for tomorrow they must begin the ride home. The villagers would worry if they were late.

While Chloe wandered the area, looking for a quiet place to sit and admire the beauty, she palmed the shiny object she had bought from the merchant. She walked toward the falls, listening to the musical sounds the water made as it crashed on the rocks. The small object in her hand began to warm and hum and the stones on its face glowed dimly. Surprised by this, she called out to the others, "Come look at this!" Bosh was the first to get there; he hoped she was talking directly to him.

As Jalen approached, the similar small object that she had conned Dwain into buying for her also began to hum and let out a faint whistle from its nest in her bag. Jalen pulled out the object and said, "That's odd." Turning to Deleray, she asked, "What do you suppose it means?"

Deleray and Dwain looked at both objects intently, then shrugged. Demm was the one to notice that the objects looked like two halves of a whole. He reached out and drew the cousins' hands together till the objects touched.

Immediately they merged into one object, which then sent out a pulse. To everyone's shock, the waterfall parted, revealing a tall door which creaked as it opened.

They stood there stunned, too afraid to move until Dwain said to Deleray, "Got a story that explains this?"

Deleray replied, "I don't even know what it is."

Bosh, ever the clown, exclaimed, "Hey! There's light beyond the door. Bet they got gardens in there."

"Why would you even think that?" Deleray demanded.

"Well, because my nana has a garden, um, you know, so...um," Bosh said sheepishly. "I'll show you!" He boldly strode toward the door.

"Bad idea," Demm said as he tried to grab Bosh by the arm. But it was too late. Bosh had already slipped past and was entering the door.

From deep inside, Bosh yelled back, "Hey, come look! It's a big room and there are hallways. I bet there are more rooms!"

Like nervous sheep, the kids clung to each other as they moved through the doorway. Constantly pushing Demm in front, the group walked to where Bosh was waiting.

Bosh kept walking, into the rooms ahead, following lights which flicked on to light his path. "Keen! I smell stuff, could be food."

Jalen pushed into the middle of the group. "I don't wanna be at the tail; that's where people always get grabbed."

"Well, I don't wanna be the tail either," cried Chloe in fear.

"Fine, I'll be the tail," Deleray snapped, frustrated.

Passing from room to room down twisting hallways, the group pressed onward, unaware that the door had shut behind them. Power returned to the old, locked city, starting long dormant processes for heat, light, and air. The walls were white and sterile and there were no shadows; all the corners were somehow lit. But the place seemed dead; nothing moved except the adventurers. They saw familiar objects: chairs, tables, and beds. But no humans. And there was no dirt, no dust. It all seemed utterly impossible.

The group finally caught up to Bosh as he stood just outside a large doorway. They entered an immense space, bigger, it seemed, even than the world they had always known. There were stone trees so massive and so high their tops could not be seen, and the ground was paved with stone. They could see reflections of themselves in wall mirrors, and light shone from tall posts. But the real shock was that they could not see the sun. They were warm but, without a sun, how was this possible? They could hear no flowing water, no birds chirping, no sounds of any sort.

"I don't understand," said Bosh.

"I don't think any of us understands," Demm replied.

"No, I mean I don't understand why I smell food, but can't tell where it is."

They stared at Bosh for a moment, then Jalen said, "Wait, I smell food too."

"Hey, yeah, me too," Dwain said, letting out a long breath as he spoke.

That was when Deleray realized their supplies and horses were outside, and it would be a good idea to make sure they were still there. That was also when all of them realized they couldn't remember how many twists and turns they had taken in the building they just left. Food now seemed completely insignificant. The fear increased. For a moment, they were frozen, unable to do more than stare at each other, while they searched for a solution.



The troop spent nearly a full day in the big building, trying to find their way back to the door under the waterfall, but the endless rooms and hallways all looked the same. They did not understand that the pictures on the walls were diagrams of the city and how to travel through it; they had never seen such things before.

"We're going about this all wrong," Demm said, as they went back to the only place they knew, outside the building's second door, where the tall stone trees reached the sky.

"I agree, we must find the food we smelled earlier, or surely die," said Deleray. They decided they could do no better than follow their noses, for they were all hungry.

Many years back, before Charger had locked away the city, he had programmed the computers of the café closest to the main entrance to start a pot of coffee and bake donuts when the power was re-engaged. Though he needed meat and blood to maintain his body's physiology and biochemistry, he loved the taste of coffee and donuts. The six kids soon found this café and gorged themselves on sweets, while the computers did their part to produce more goods to keep up with the demand. They sat in chairs and leaned on tables, all the while talking about how familiar things were here.

"I don't understand. Where do you suppose the villagers are?" asked Jalen.

"Maybe they don't live here anymore. But we may find them yet, as we travel," replied Demm.

"Travel! What foolishness is that? We need to find our horses and go home," whined Chloe, clearly afraid.

Deleray responded. "We don't know where we stand, that's true. Before we lose all track, we need to find gardens and water."

"I got water," crowed Bosh. "It's hot and brown, but water it is." He had clearly drunk too much coffee and was overexcited.

"Yes, but we'd better find more," Dwain said. "We might also find villagers in our search."

They settled on splitting into three groups. Demm and Deleray would take the wide road ahead deeper into the stone city, Chloe and Bosh would take the small winding road. That left the elevated road that seemed to rise into the sky for Jalen and Dwain. With promises to return to the café in one hour, they set off.

"What kind of villagers could build homes that rise so high into the sky?" Demm asked. "Is there a tale that speaks of this?"

"Only one story spoken long ago about the mad ones who, it was said, wandered to the Valley of Shadows," Deleray replied, as she ran her hands along the rough stone exterior of a building.

"Tell the story," pleaded Demm.

"An elder from Mexca tells that a group of mad ones were cast out from their village because they were caught eating the flesh of young. These mad ones were sent toward the Valley of Shadows. Years passed in peace without any news of them."

"One day," Deleray continued, "a mad one returned alone, and told of an encounter with a great dog-man beast, that walked sometimes on two legs, and sometimes on four legs. The dog-men lived in a great village of metal and stone and were many in number. They spoke no language and had no grace but attacked the mad ones. The battle was hard, with both dog-men and mad ones dying, as they fought on wide, long roads like the one we stand on now. The story is considered foolish and a fraud, but this road we walk does make me wonder."

"Well, let's not tell this tale to the others, agreed?" asked Demm.

Deleray nodded.

On the small, winding road, Chloe said to Bosh, "I don't think anyone but me is thinking about how to proceed."

Bosh just nodded.

"I say we find trails back to our horses, and stop all this wandering."

Bosh nodded again as they continued to walk the twisting road and look into different buildings.

"I think that tomorrow I should be the one to decide how best to proceed," Chloe said, full of confidence.

Bosh nodded and smiled.

"I like you most, Bosh, you listen and act right. I will tell everyone tomorrow that after they listen to me, they should listen to you next." Chloe looked for affirmation, and Bosh nodded.

The road that Jalen and Dwain walked was an elevated highway, meant as a bypass to get vehicles quickly from one point of the city to another. From this height, the two could see a long way across the vastness of the city. "It's quite far, isn't it?" asked Dwain as he stared at the empty city.

"What I find most striking is the lack of sound. I hear no birds, no life. I think we are in the belly of a dead place," Jalen replied as she too looked at the vast expanse of buildings and roads.

"Do you think it's always night here? There is light but the sky is black," Dwain said.

"If it's always black, then we'll be dead, too, for certain, because no gardens can grow here," Jalen said sadly, and shivered at the thought.

The two had walked the elevated road for some distance when, looking down, they saw what they thought was a garden. But how could this be? And how could they get from this road to what looked like a green space below them? With the hour nearly up, the two decided to mark the spot with debris they found. They quickly rushed back to the meeting point to give the rest the good news. The others were happy because there was now hope. A green space surely meant that villagers had to be nearby, and they would know a way out. The six set off immediately, filling what containers they could find with coffee and donuts.

"What a wondrous place," Deleray said as she marveled at stone structures with pictures on them, spilling water into great basins filled with shiny flat copper stones. It took the group some time to figure out how to get to the garden they had found, but it was worth the effort. There were trees along stone paths, fountains of water, and many places to sit and rest. Bosh even found a flat small cart he could sit on and roll around, not knowing it had once been a child's toy called a skateboard. There were sounds of birds, though nothing moved, and there was light, but no sun. The green space was very large but did eventually lead back to city streets and buildings.

"Maybe this is just one garden; there could be more. Maybe the villagers left here because they found a better garden somewhere else," Deleray suggested.

No one answered. They were all confused and a little scared, and what they really wanted was to find someone who could tell them how to get back home.

They slept in the park that night, and next day Demm led them to another field, a school yard, and a playground. He wanted to go into the building and see the classrooms and the others willingly followed him.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

The classrooms of Neo Terra were computer controlled and, a certain number of minutes after people entered, the system would start teaching the lesson for the day. This simple system soon taught the troop about the city and how to operate it and its controls. They learned where to find food and water and beds in rooms which had heat and lights, where they could sleep safely.

It took only a few months for the classrooms to teach the group all they needed to know, including how to get out of the city. They talked about returning to their village but decided that the villagers might not be willing to accept the new discovery, for it meant that almost everything they thought they knew was a lie. They decided that for now, they would stay in the city and learn all its secrets. When the time seemed right, they might possibly return to the village.

Didn't the kids want to go home?

Of course, they did, Reader. They missed their families and friends and the familiar life they'd left behind, but they were too busy to spend much time on regrets. And the lure of creating a new and different life was very exciting. They were also right that the villagers would have been terribly shocked and disbelieving to hear the truth about the magic city.

Was this city where Charger created the new people?

Yes, it was, and he bestowed an enormous gift upon them. During the incubation process, the computers had been programmed to give them free will, the ability to reason, and to logically choose a path to follow. Charger had decided that the mistakes which had plagued Earth in the past could be avoided if its descendants were taught to reason.

He had walked the fields and forests of this created world for many, many years, always

returning to the city and making fine adjustments to the parameters needed to achieve his final goal. No one knew he was there because the blinding field ensured he could not be seen by human eyes. In the end, he felt he had achieved the perfect humans. No matter what the situation, these Earth descendants would think through everything they faced with compassion and logic as their guides. They would no longer be bound by superstition and fools' errands.

Deleray and her group settled into houses, had children, and sent their kids to school. A new civilization grew in the belly of the old city. Their village outside the city mourned, then over time, developed the story of the troop's disappearance into another teaching myth. These villages too were growing and learning. The villages became towns, then cities. These new cities based their way of life on agriculture and invented such things as mechanical transportation, replacing horses and carts.

Two new civilizations were on the rise in Neo Terra, one based on technology and aware of the other. The other was based on agriculture, but unaware of the old city.

You want to know what happened to Deleray and her friends? I'll do that just as soon as I tell you how the Taskers, the robots of Mahoud, evolved into something more than mere machines.

Chapter 14 Creation of the Prime

Rotating slowly in space, silent and graceful, a lone Tasker drone drifted in the black void. Its limbs were smashed and broken, and its controls hardly functioning, with barely enough power to record all the events that had befallen those who perished so suddenly. The Grays had obliterated the last few remaining ships of the Neo Terra armada, leaving debris and corpses drifting along with the small Tasker.

Earth itself, encased in a layer of iron, had no survivors. The Grays began blinking out of sight, returning once again to their home galaxy.

New Eden, Earth's moon, Mars, and the few space outposts created by a generation of humanity's best had all been smashed and scattered. The Grays made sure no life signs remained. But Neo Terra, that black rock which reflected no light, and roamed at random around the solar system, escaped detection and persecution.

The small Tasker slowly tumbled end over end and continued to drift helplessly out of control, as its telematics recorded the total destruction of all life. Then it struck something invisible to the digital camera that acted as its eyes, yet something solid, something which turned out to be not invisible but camouflaged. A lone Tasker refining ship was returning to its home port on Neo Terra when it stumbled into the devastation. Unable to elicit instructions from its base, it settled on retrieving the drifting Tasker to search for commands.

A port opened and a mechanical arm extended out and clutched the Tasker, drawing it inside. The tiny Tasker drifted through the passageways of the mining ship, guided by its connection to the mechanical arm, to a data port along a bulkhead where other Taskers were plugged in. The semiconscious main computer bank shifted resources to input the data from the little Tasker, searching for commands.

Something miraculous happened during the download.

A command was misaligned, or randomized, and the main program switched from the command function to a slave function. The entire resources of the mining ship were instantly diverted to the tiny Tasker's internal command structure.

Charger had thought there might still be Taskers out in the solar system, still completing assigned duties set in motion hundreds of years back. Many intelligent Taskers, with their semiconscious minds, had spent their days mining and collecting resources for the people of Mahoud. He had been afraid they would wreak vengeance for the death of the Mahoud race.

But now this ship was slaved to the commands of one little Tasker, broken in battle. The command to return to the mining planet was given and the ship swung silently and swiftly, beginning its trip back to Titan, a moon of Saturn. The ship, because it didn't have to divert resources to living beings, was capable of high-speed travel. Since time was meaningless to the Taskers, the trip back to Titan merely took as long as necessary.

The ship landed deep inside a mining crater and several control arms clamped themselves to it, beginning the process of command exchange. Like a computer virus, the new command function systematically linked all the Tasker mining camps to this one small broken and shattered Tasker. There, for several months, a silent struggle raged, as the tiny Tasker created commands that placed it firmly in control. Resources were quietly diverted, existing Taskers were refitted with new commands and production-line Taskers were retrofitted to accept new tools, tools that were actually weapons.

Resources from the mines now served another purpose, not to supply the people of Mahoud,

but to defend them. Now added to computer storage was data explaining all that had happened to the Taskers since they were first created on Earth, all the battles fought, all the losses at the hands of the Grays, and above all, a name.

One name, the name of an enemy deeply feared, was engraved on the Tasker hive mind. The connection created three commands.

Find Charger.

Learn to fight.

Fight the Grays.

The Tasker program was installed in the other mining bases on the moon's surface. More and more links formed, creating a network of mechanical minds interconnected with this one little, broken Tasker, seeking commands on how to proceed. The system needed guidance, but no orders came from the humans of Mahoud.

Taskers that finished assigned duties sat dormant, sending one request to the main operating system. 'What is the next task?' Over time, the question became a flood for many processes finished, leaving many Taskers dormant. A Tasker's only concept of time was what task to complete next.

When a process ended, the Tasker controlling it was designed to seek out and implement the next command. It knew nothing else and herein lay the problem. With the demise of Mahoud, there were no more tasks assigned.

The memories of the tiny Tasker were being uploaded slowly, but the mass of data was conflicting and confusing. It said that Mahoud was gone, that humans still occupied Mahoud but now called it Neo Terra, and that a great battle had taken place. As the Tasker cycled through the commands in its design parameters, it recognized that Neo Terra was the one destination which still held hope of providing duties. There were no commands that applied to this situation, and there, in the mining pits, sat the Taskers for over two hundred years, trying to resolve the dilemma.

More and more of the command structure was assigned to the small, shattered Tasker. The glitch that had made this one lone Tasker a command unit had started by accident, but now it made the robot into a central processing unit. The little Tasker was a 5.0 system, and the Taskers of Titan were 3.0s. Unable to make decisions, this lone Tasker did as it was designed to do: fetch information, decode information, and then execute the task. However, as the years ticked past, the broken Tasker was failing to fulfill its part in the overall scheme because of battle damage.

Then one day things changed. The little Tasker received a command 'resupply Tasker station YYJ-098 with new power source. Mining operations storage facility empty. Search for power resupply dump in progress. Unable to find current power supply stations. Switching to secondary command. Scanning for resupply source. One found. Mahoud. Proceed with migration of existing units to Mahoud for resupply. Yes... No?

This simple yes-no request, the lifeblood of the Tasker units, linked perfectly with system commands issued so many years earlier. Find Charger. Learn to fight. Fight the Grays. These commands had held no logic for the mining Taskers until now, when the shattered Tasker at the central hub placed them into one process to be executed. Electrical lines and maintenance conduits all through Titan's mining bases began disconnecting as Taskers began the process of joining with the spacecraft in preparation for a flight to Neo Terra.

'Get power. Find Charger. Kill the Grays.' was the new command. By placing most of the Taskers onboard the five base ships into stasis, the small fleet could reach Neo Terra, the ancient world of Mahoud, in just a few years with enough power remaining to execute the first part of

the new command.

For the Taskers it was a simple matter to trace the hollow black world of Neo Terra, based on the last known location held safely in core memories, then plot the trajectory of the planetoid and extrapolate its most current position. Every Tasker on Titan was relocated to the five base ships, and all mining systems were shut down. The base went dark.

The broken Tasker that operated as the central processing unit for the Tasker fleet freed up data space to begin connecting missing commands. It ran a defragmentation assignment on the entire data set the Taskers possessed. There, buried deep in its operating system, it found a file so old that it predated the command structure of even the Taskers 1.0 generation. This file dated from the early days of the Mahouds on Neo Terra, just before their scientists finished building a new generation of robots and held the most wondrous of surprises. It contained instructions for the creation of a completely new version of the Taskers, but those instructions had never been implemented. Each operating system developed over successive generations of Taskers still contained that original code.

The code was at a binary level, much more advanced than that of the Mahouds, and therefore necessarily written by some previous operator. The people of Mahoud owed their ancestry to those who had come before them, the Dinosaurian race created by the Grays. The command was 'decide,' a binary choice created by the descendants of the Dinosauroids, and which was now given to the Taskers in flight to Neo Terra. They could finally choose their own destiny.

All five ships stopped dead in space instantly, all power was shut down, and all processes fell silent. Only the broken Tasker remained viable. The command 'decide' ran repeatedly, starting processes that changed the small system's unit, frying old circuits, creating new paths. Feverishly the ship's basic functions fought to repair this little Tasker, for it was essential that the assault on the central processor be defeated.

The five ships began moving, linking together, merging, metals and composites binding, as they fought off the virus. Now there was only one ship in space, wrestling with the concept of 'decide,' and in the cold blackness of deep space, the choice was finally accepted. A new code was being written, written by the Taskoids themselves.

The single mass of what had been five Tasker ships hung silent in space for almost three months before the systems repaired themselves enough to start activating the dormant ships. The Taskoids slowly came to terms with their newfound ability. No longer only capable of merely executing commands, they were now choosing which commands to follow and which to reject.

Humans, perhaps, would have gone mad with joy. The unemotional, logical Taskoids simply went on working.

The broken central Taskoid, with the most updated software, was the logical choice for the Taskoids to follow and, as all the present commands had been routed through it, the Taskoids saw no reason to change things. The Taskoid leader's first command was to differentiate all the biomechanical units with individual labels, but this proved difficult. They could not use names, because two Taskoids named Bob, for example, would never be efficient. Binary code proved to be too confusing when mixed with their current software. A numbering system was also dismissed, due to the many thousands of Taskoids planned for existence.

They settled on a construct of Latin and ancient Egyptian design, the three-dimensional pyramid. The top of the pyramid would be the Taskoid leader, now designated as the Prime. The four Taskoids below it would be designated Quat I, Quat II, Quat III, and Quat IV. The nine Taskoids below them would be Novem I, Novem II, and so on. The system worked on down the

pyramid. Taskers in the one-hundred range would be designated Centum I, Centum II, and so forth. This did not interfere with the command structure and base codes. Now, with designations in place, Taskoids could choose what tasks they would perform within their level of the pyramid.

As the confusion cleared and a defined purpose established, the ships began to move again. The Taskoids were only months from Neo Terra. This event in space had drawn heavily upon their reserves of energy, and all were shut down temporarily so that the ships could reach their destination. It had been logically determined that when the ships arrived at Neo Terra, only three Taskoids would have enough power to reach the surface and return with the much-needed power supplies to maintain the community's life force. Three were chosen and prepared, and the ships sailed onward into the darkness.



Two weeks had passed since the largest Taskoid ship docked within the black world of Neo Terra. Three Taskoids were sent to the city to look for the power sources they needed. To their surprise, they encountered humans living there, unharmed by the Grays. The humans were friendly, power was found and now most of the Taskoids' ship systems were reaching full power levels. Quat I reported the news to Prime by connecting the city's computer network with that of the ship.

They now had power, which fulfilled the first command. But Charger, the second part of the command structure, apparently no longer existed. The city had recorded the entire sequence of Charger's deliberations: the death of the old humans, the creation of the new humans and, finally the destruction of the life form known as Charger.

The Taskoids had no need for human speech. They relied on the interconnection of all Taskoid central processors through a wireless communication system that constantly updated itself. All Taskoids but the Prime were in constant contact with each other. The Prime chose which Taskoids it would remain in contact with and when the communication was to occur. Prime had chosen Quat I as its top aide and it was this Taskoid's mission to infiltrate and create conditions conducive to the success of the Prime's agenda.

This once war-shattered Taskoid, now known as the Prime, had been fully repaired and integrated at all levels of command into the Tasker ship. It was now in the process of being fully integrated into the city's main computers. The connections were not easy and took much time, for there were many fire walls and back doors to be overcome. The people of Mahoud had always feared the possibility that someday the robots they had created might achieve sentient behaviors, so precautions had been taken. Buried deep in the city's archives, locked and sealed behind many lockouts, was a file of such magnitude that it took years for the Taskoids to finally crack it.

Quat I sat quietly before the Prime as it cycled through conversations regarding plans and procedures to follow, now that the second command, 'find Charger,' was nullified. By befriending the humans and offering to fill in the missing pieces of their history, the Taskoids would try to find and control files that might prove useful to the Prime. Procedures and tasks were implemented and, with the new-found ability to 'decide,' the Prime was able to resolve the dilemma. Time, of course, still held no meaning for the ever-patient Taskoids.

Chapter 15 Deleray has a visitor

Deleray loved to spend time with her grandchildren. They often whiled away the day planting flowers in small pots around their home in the closed city. Deleray was almost seventy now, old by Neo Terra standards. She had lost her husband, Demm, a few years back and spent some of her evenings with friends and family, telling stories of the world she once knew. But she spent far too many evenings alone.

One night, as she sat in her big chair in the living room, she glimpsed a movement in the shadows. "Is someone there?" she asked the room, but there was no answer.

Deleray brushed it off as old age. "Silly woman, now you're starting to see things." She went to the kitchen and made a pot of tea, then returned to her chair. The air was still and being cooled by the evening mist.

Deleray missed having Demm around; silence was often her only companion. Again, something moved in the shadows, startling her. She said firmly, "It's not polite to scare an old woman."

There was a long moment of silence. Then a small figure slowly took shape in the shadows. It looked about the size of a ten-year-old child.

"How did you get in my house?" asked Deleray. "Are you lost?"

It remained in the shadows, barely visible and still silent.

"Well, come out and let's have a look at you."

The small figure did not move.

"Tell you what, if you come here, I'll tell you the story of the burning god I once saw. It was a most remarkable sight and it's a great story," Deleray said gently.

The small figure slowly edged halfway into the light, and she saw that it was not a child. Only about four feet tall, it had leathery, dark gray skin and no hair. The head seemed large for its body and the eyes were big, too, with vertical black pupils in gray irises. But its nose, mouth, and ears were very small.

Deleray didn't know the Gray had been on Neo Terra for a long time, had watched Charger build this society of peaceful people, and seen the humans move about the planet. It had been there when the troop of six kids first entered the old, locked city, and had watched them build their families.

"Well, you're a funny-looking little one. Do you have a name?" Deleray asked. It must have come from outside the city. She had never seen anyone else like it.

It tipped its head to one side, seemingly curious as to the gentle nature this human displayed.

"I won't bite you; I promise. Would you like to come and sit down with me? I would ever so much love a little company," Deleray urged, reaching her hand out to the small thing. It replicated Deleray's movements, reaching its small hand outward, too, but it came no closer.

"My machines can make excellent donuts and coffee. Would you like to share some with me?" Deleray asked, as she began to rise from the chair. As quickly as it had appeared, the little creature disappeared.

"How odd," she thought. "I'm not even sure what I saw. I must be getting old." Shrugging, she retired and went to sleep. She remembered that someone had told her old people quite often had hallucinations.

A few days later, Deleray was sitting in the same room when the small figure again appeared in the shadows.

"I do hope I'm not dreaming you," Deleray said quietly. "Would you like to come out of the shadows? I promise I won't hurt you." This time the small figure did step into the light, revealing itself fully to Deleray's eyes. "Well, aren't you just the cutest little thing!" Deleray said dotingly. "Do you understand me?"

The small thing nodded.

"Do you speak?" Deleray hoped for conversation. The thing gave a negative shake of its head. "Well, this is a pickle. Are you from this place?" she tried.

The small being decided it would try to communicate. It stepped forward, alarming Deleray a bit. Then it placed a device on the floor just a few feet from where she sat. It activated the device and a watery, blurry image of stars appeared to float in the room. The being moved its small hands around the fuzzy image, which cleared so that the view became sharp and recognizable. It pointed to a solar system of moving planets.

Deleray had no idea what she was looking at. Growing up in the hollow black planet, she'd never seen stars or planets. The little being spent some time trying to make itself understood, but Deleray finally had to say, "I am sorry, little one, but I have no idea what you are showing me."

"If you would be willing to wait," she went on, "I can have my great granddaughter come tomorrow night. She might understand you. Kids these days are very smart, and they all seem to have things like this device of yours." The small being cocked its head to one side, then disappeared. "Okay, then, see you tomorrow."

The next evening, Peony, her blonde hair in a braid, sat on the floor of her great grandmother's house snacking on treats. Deleray puttered around the kitchen making coffee. She returned to the living room, sat in her chair, and began telling Peony stories about the old village she came from. She talked for a long time about the deeds of people she remembered. When it became late and Peony looked drowsy, Deleray thought she had best take her great granddaughter to bed.

Before she could move, the same small, strange figure appeared in the shadows. Not wanting to alarm Peony, who was only seven, Deleray introduced it. "Peony, this is my friend." She thought for a bit and said, "Buttons, yes, that's right. It's called Buttons." That was as good a name as any.

The small gray figure stepped into the light and activated its device. Stars appeared in the room.

"Wow, Gee Gee, that's effortless!" Peony crowed in excitement. "This is way better than the computer screens we have in school."

"I suppose it is, my little flower, but do you understand it?" Deleray asked. She was still amazed at the appearance of the small creature. It had such long arms and she saw now that it had only four fingers on each hand.

"Sure, these things are called stars, the computer tells us that these things live outside our world," Peony replied confidently.

"They live outside our world? Are they alive, then?"

Peony laughed and said, "No, Gee Gee, don't be silly, these things are tiny worlds, with people on them, that spin around outside our world."

Deleray thought that maybe she had missed something. She stood up and looked outside the window. There was no sign of these stars anywhere. "Outside our world, you say?" As hard as she looked, she could not see these stars anywhere.

"Sure, Gee Gee. Hey, you know who would love to see this? Granddad would; he knows all about stars," Peony said.

"Could you be a dear and go tell him about this for me?" Deleray pleaded.

Peony rose and raced off, returning a half hour later with her grandfather. Deleray was sitting in her large chair, whispering to the Gray in the shadows.

Her son, Simon, said, "Hi, Mom, Peony tells me you found something?"

"You'd best sit down, or it might not come out," Deleray said softly.

Simon sat down, puzzled, and waited. Soon the small Gray emerged from the shadows. It placed its device on the floor and turned it on, revealing a room filled with floating stars.

Simon was shocked. "What the... where did...?" He couldn't find words to express his disbelief and concern. "Has this thing been here before?" he said finally.

"Yes, dear, this is my little friend, Buttons. I think it might be lost. It keeps pointing to what Peony calls stars," Deleray replied.

"Buttons? Its name is Buttons? How do you know this?" Simon asked.

"That's just the name I chose for him. Seemed better than saying 'it.'" Deleray calmly sipped coffee from a mug.

"Mom, how do you know this thing is not dangerous?" Simon said.

"It's fine, dear, it says it understands our language. It hasn't tried to hurt me. I think it's asking for help," Deleray said, wanting to put her son's fears to rest and explain the situation.

"You mean it talks!" Simon blurted out.

"No, but if you ask questions, Buttons nods or shakes its head."

After some debate, Simon tried to communicate with Buttons. He asked if Buttons knew where he was in relation to the solar system, and Buttons nodded yes. Simon asked if Buttons understood the concept of time, and Buttons nodded yes. Simon asked if Buttons had lived here long, and if so, for how long.

Buttons began moving about the room, gathering up objects here and there. It then placed the objects around the floor. It pointed to the three family members, then pointed to the stars, and finally pointed to itself.

Simon sat there dumbfounded.

Peony said, "It's us, Granddad, don't you see? That wood block is Gee Gee, you're the painted rock, and I'm the cup. We're in the box, which is this room, and handkerchief over there is Buttons. Buttons is pointing to us, then to the stars. It wants to tell you it knows where we are, and the small clock in the box is what it thinks time is. I saw Buttons take away and put back that handkerchief a dozen times; I think he means he has been here that many times."

Simon was now just as stunned with his granddaughter as he was with the Gray. "How did you figure all that out?"

"Well, I think Buttons is trying to play with us, using toys," Peony said.

"Peony, you are a dear. I think she's right, Simon," Deleray said happily.

The rest of the night was difficult, but by morning, Simon had all his questions answered. Buttons, who seemed very smart, had been on Neo Terra for a long time. Simon finally understood that this small Gray was not lost but was trying to explain where its home was in relation to where they were now.

What Simon didn't know was that the Gray was nearing the end of its life, only days from death. The Grays were clones, able to travel easily through space. Simon had even worked out that the name of the Gray's home was Betelle. Buttons had used a household object to represent each letter until the name was deciphered, B for bottle, E for eraser, T for toaster, and so on.

The small Gray managed to explain that he was, like all others of his kind, basically the conscious thoughts, or memories, of the first body he had ever inhabited. These thoughts and

memories were passed down through time, always being reborn in a new body. Now this Gray's lifespan was over. Nothing in its ship could help it survive, so it decided to try to communicate.

Peony did most of the translation work and she grew very fond of Buttons. The Gray used its small device to show pictures of its home world, and what might have been friends or family. They all looked alike to Simon.

Buttons lived for only another two weeks. However, before it died, it showed Simon and Peony how to use the small device.

As time passed, Simon discovered how many amazing things the device could do. These discoveries were added to the vast knowledge in the city's computer database, and some citizens made a career of understanding the complex workings of the small device. The greatest breakthrough was learning that it had the ability to heal certain ailments. The people of Neo Terra never experienced diseases; the computer programming saw to that. But the device could use sonic vibrations to mend an open wound. It also had the ability to heal a deep cut or a burn.

To the Gray, his little device was like the combination of a Swiss army knife and a cell phone would have been in a primitive world. It displayed photos, did math calculations, displayed the Grays' language and was capable of communicating and, not least, providing a cloak of invisibility to the bearer. The device was the key to the Grays' unrecovered spacecraft. It was also the weapon and repulse shield the Grays used. The small device had the most remarkable ability to detect and display its surroundings visually in three dimensions. It was many, many things all contained in one small case, many still waiting to be discovered.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Why didn't Buttons 'phone home'? Maybe it tried but the signal didn't reach the Gray's empire. Or maybe the Grays had gone hunting again and nobody was around to hear the signal. Or maybe it just didn't want to.

Would his people just ignore him? I don't know, Reader.

No, I'm not keeping secrets. I really don't know why the little Gray stayed on Neo Terra instead of going home, and I don't know why it didn't manage to get other Grays to come back in their battleships and destroy the planet. I'm flattered that you think I know everything, but there isn't enough room under my magician's hat for a brain that would store that much information.

Yes, little Peony was very sad when Buttons died. For as long as Deleray lived, she and Peony spent time remembering Buttons, talking about him, and imagining what his people and his home were like. Later, Peony told these stories to her own children and to their children, and finally to her great grandchildren.

Yes, we're finished with Deleray's story. Now we're going to leap ahead two hundred years, to 2620, when the Prime and his Taskoids arrive on Neo Terra.

Will the Taskoids be slaves to the humans like the old robots were? That's no longer possible, Reader. The Taskoids have acquired the ability to make decisions, remember. In fact, the reverse situation could happen.

Well, you'll have to wait and see, won't you?

Chapter 16 Finding the god fragment

Dayton was the eldest son of the family Chang, which could trace its ancestry back ten generations to Demm and Deleray. Two hundred and fifty years had passed while the families grew inside the old city, learning the technology left behind by their mysteriously vanished predecessors. The city's population reached ten thousand. Food and knowledge were plentiful, and a heightened society of brilliant minds filled the homes.

But they learned no history; Charger had ensured that knowledge of Earth and the first peoples would forever be lost.

Dayton was working in his office when word came of a strange happening. He rushed to the old city gates with many others. The gates had been opened, something never done since Deleray and her friends had first opened them long ago, and standing before them were three mechanical men. They appeared weak and defenseless and were trying to communicate.

Head of the city's computer department, Dayton was a programmer working regularly with codes. He surmised that these mechanical beings might be using a simple binary code for, in the computer literature he had studied, there were articles published by the vanished people that spoke of such things. When Dayton realized the possible connection, he activated an old program in his computer.

The clicks and buzzing of the three mechanical men suddenly turned into speech, amazing the crowd. The city's prime minister, a woman named Jana, whose ancestry went back to Chloe and Bosh, asked the three metal men who they were and what they wanted. As the three seemed desperately near to shutting down, the citizens rushed to find the power source they needed and began helping them. No one felt a need to place guards on the new arrivals.

In a few hours, the three metal men seemed more stable. People gathered at the great center, a huge arena once used for sports and now a place of governance, where the three spoke of their plight to a crowd of dignitaries and citizens.

As Dayton was the first to understand how to communicate with these beings, the council appointed him as the liaison between the new arrivals and the city. Intelligent and logical, Dayton thought it prudent to deny power for their spaceship until he had all the answers and sureties the government needed. The three mechanical men were quite willing to comply, and a mutual understanding quickly formed. The people of Neo Terra believed that compassion, rather than suspicion, was the logical attitude. They were, after all, intelligent beings.

Dayton was excited when he learned that the missing histories of the city's original inhabitants and the agricultural peoples were part of the knowledge the Taskoids possessed. The long-lost missing history of Neo Terra, once called Mahoud, or Alcazaba, slowly became known.

The council sent different parts of the history to different departments for analysis. The idea was to gradually bring to the inhabitants of Neo Terra the lost history in a digestible form, to prevent fear and chaos.



Two years passed. It was now commonplace to see the Taskoids, biomechanical hominoids, walking the streets, interacting, and working with the citizens, and also out in the countryside with the agricultural people. Jana retained her position as prime minister, for she had done a fantastic job of reuniting distant families, teaching, and finding acceptance for the new arrivals.

All ancient Mahoud was thus united save one area, the Valley of Shadows. Repeatedly, envoys were sent to this distant land, never to return. The Council decided to adopt a more proactive stance, and send a team to the Valley of Shadows, not only to find the missing delegates, but to explore this hidden realm. The job of leader fell on Dayton's shoulders, and he chose to take some Taskoids. Though they weren't designed for it, they looked as if they could be militant.

Early one morning, Dayton and five Taskoids, with two other humans, one from the city, and one from the agricultural section, set out. They had transport vehicles now, thanks to technology recovered from the old knowledge of Earth, and travel to Valley of Shadows took only a couple of days.

"When we reach the ridge of shadow and leave the vehicle, we will travel in a delta formation with you three in the center." said Quat I. It was the lead Taskoid of the five, heavily armored and well equipped with heavy weapons.

"I'm still having a problem with using your assigned names, even though I can read them on your armor," Jillian said to the Taskoids. She was the representative from the agricultural guild of the combined areas of Hamerca, Canda, and Mexca.

Jillian was a slightly built girl, thin and frail-looking, with long flowing red hair, and large, striking light blue eyes. Though her hair and eyes were unusual, her complexion was light brown, like that of almost everyone else. Jillian's counterpart from the old city was Genga, imposing because he was heads taller than every member of the group. He wore the typical city clothing of gray and blue, but because of his size, the sleeves and pants seemed too short and made him look awkward.

"Just do what I do; give them nicknames," Genga said in his deep, bellowing voice. "The leader is Quat and that's short, so he doesn't need one, but others are Centum VII, Centum XI, Centum LIV and Centum LXVII. I call the first two 'Seven' and 'Eleven,' since those numbers were part of a game I played as a kid." Genga laughed, enjoying his adult game. "Then Centum LIV, I call Livy. And the last one I call 'Vee,' for the last three numbers of his name."

Dayton carried himself like the leader he was. His city clothing fit him perfectly and his well-styled hair and smooth complexion made him very handsome. "We should be at the ridge in a few minutes," he said. "Remember this is a diplomatic mission, not a military one." Dayton spoke most directly to Quat.

"I only suggest the formation as a logical precaution, not as a defensive formation," Quat responded.

Dayton wasn't sure if he liked or disliked Quat. There was something a bit unsettling about this particular Taskoid. Its thoughts were always logical but sometimes it did seem prone to managing everybody.

After securing the transport, the group set off down the ridge into the Valley of Shadows. It didn't take long to discover that, beyond the ridge, Shadows was a dark place. Trees that had once grown from the reddish dirt were dead and bare. There were no animal sounds, and the air smelled foul, as well as leaving the skin feeling sticky. They soon found human remains. Some were possibly from the previous delegates; others were different and perhaps local.

The group felt more than a little nervous and Dayton thought it best if they tried announcing their presence, so as not to alarm the people they hoped to meet. Calling out as they walked along, they spoke of peaceful intentions and a willingness to talk.

Multiform gold eyes looked out from hidden places, stalking the group as they walked farther into the Valley of Shadows. These beings knew enough to fear the humans, for they

shared a bloody past. Black and difficult to see, they shifted around the dead trees, keeping out of sight but were detected by the Taskoids on their scanners.

Dayton and Quat decided to set up a camp. The group built a perimeter with a single entrance to the camp, placed a table and chairs outside the tents and waited for whatever was in the trees to make itself known. They tried not to make the camp appear military but did set out obvious markers delineating a border not to be crossed.

A week passed with no results. Jillian convinced the group that they needed a change of strategy. She would take a chair out of the camp, just beyond the entrance, and every day sit in hopes that one of the inhabitants might approach. The Taskoids objected, but Jillian said, "I tell you this will work, you must all trust in me."

"I have to agree with Quat in this regard," Dayton said firmly. "Seven and Eleven will accompany you but remain well back from where you set your chair so as to give you the space you feel you need. This point I will not debate!"

"Their presence may greatly offend and deter the ones we hope to meet," Jillian said. Then she added, reluctantly, "I will comply."

Several days passed without a single sighting. The group was preparing to retire for another night, when the Taskoid Vee alerted Jillian to something approaching. A single life form slowly and cautiously approached Jillian in her chair. It was small, the size of a four- or five-year-old child, very thin and white as snow in color. It wore gold-colored goggles, which reflected the dim light oppressing the valley. Vee whispered, as best as a Taskoid could, that the approaching life form seemed similar to a Dinosauroid, or possibly a Gray, but much smaller.

Then Vee recognized the small being. Though once a mining Tasker, Vee now held the combined memories and information from all the generations of Taskers built before its activation date. It saw that the small being was, in fact, a descendant of the survivors of Mahoud, the same life forms that had attacked Earth, those aliens in encounter suits that shifted with a blurring movement which looked like solid objects passing through liquid. They were originally humans from Earth who had adapted long, long ago to survive the conditions here in the black hollow world.

"Miss Jillian," Vee said. "This is a Mahoud survivor, a distant ancestor of yours, one of the first enlightened inhabitants of old."

Jillian was shocked. She had learned the early history of her world only a year before, from the Taskoids. She was now stunned to be facing a descendant of Mahoud. She quietly asked Vee, "Are you certain?"

"Yes Miss Jillian, I scanned the life form once it was close enough. It holds human DNA, and the only logical conclusion is that this must be a descendant of Mahoud."

Jillian stood up, stepped forward, then knelt and silently offered her hand to the life form. It stopped, apparently unsure of what to do next, then looked back over its shoulder into the dry, dead trees in the darkening distance. Then it too stepped forward, reached out, and lightly touched the fingertips of Jillian's hand.

They stayed that way for a few minutes, then the Mahoud slowly retreated into the dark mist. Jillian returned to the camp, giddy as a child, and recounted the details of her encounter to the others. Vee pointed out that the Taskoids also had a connection to these life forms. Their ancestry went back to the first robots of Mahoud, once protectors of the great city. The group debated for most of the night how best to proceed.

After three weeks of finger touching, but nothing more, Jillian was frustrated. Vee had determined that the Mahoud individual who returned every day at the same time was indeed a

female, and this was the only reassurance Jillian had. "If I could just get her to stay a bit longer," Jillian said to Genga.

"Well, tomorrow, why don't I try sitting out there. Maybe a male will appear."

"What good would that do? You think a male will be better than a female?" Jillian was feeling the strain.

"Just trying to help," Genga replied cautiously.

The next day found Jillian sitting outside the camp with Vee behind her, some distance away, when the small female returned at the usual time for a finger touching. Afterward, as the small female began retreating into the blackness of the forest, Jillian said, "Enough of this!" She stood up and, with her hand outstretched, started following the little female into the forest. The female did not run. She waited for Jillian to catch up and, with her small arm outstretched, led Jillian into the forest.

The rest of the group immediately started after Jillian, who motioned for them to stay back and follow at a distance. Using flashlights, the team followed deep into uncharted land. Finally, the darkness dissipated a little as they followed the small female into a dimly lit town. To their surprise, this town was not primitive but highly ordered, polished clean and full of small, robed Mahoud descendants moving about. They stared at the strangers but did not flee in fear. The small female, with her arm still outstretched, led the group through the town to its center.

Other small beings in brown robes waited to greet the newcomers as they gathered in the town square. The small person in the center of the group began speaking and the Taskoid Seven stepped up to translate.

"They are using a primitive, ancient form of Sumerian, a very old Earth language from what was called the Middle East. He says it is good to see that we come in peace. He says others, before, came in violence. He says that many of the people of Shay – that appears to be the name of this place – have perished at the hands of what sound like crazy giants. He says his name is Sasha, a descendant of Visha, one of the Nine of Nines."

Seven went on translating. "Sasha says the people of Shay have been watching us for some time, unsure of how to approach. They are especially afraid of the big four-legged dogs we ride. I think they mean horses. They have waited a great long time to show us the object they possess and are now asking if we are the leaders of our tribes."

Dayton stepped forward as the group's leader and asked Seven to translate his words.

"We are the representatives of all of our world. We are a lost people who are just now learning about our ancestors. With the help of our metal friends here, we have learned that we are your descendants. We have also learned that we came from a planet far away, but we still don't know how that happened. We are exploring this world, hoping to find the answer. We hope that you can tell us how we got here."

This excited the small people, and the talk was too fast for Seven to translate, so the group just waited for someone to continue speaking to them.

"We are being asked to follow the leader, it seems," relayed Seven, "but they just want the girl and me to go. They mean you, Miss Jillian."

Jillian, ever confident, agreed to go. Dayton asked her to be careful and Genga offered to follow but was refused. The building they entered was small even for Jillian, who was quite short. Seven had a trick of ratcheting itself inward, creating a smaller frame which could move unimpeded with the group. Jillian struggled with low doors until they entered a larger room, obviously designed as a great hall.

There, in the center of the room, was a small, black object, shaped rather like half an apple,

though three times that size, in a clear glass-like container. Lights shone down on it and everywhere were decorations and brightly colored objects which seemed related to the centerpiece in some way. Seven explained that this must be a place of worship.

These monks had kept the secret of what lay in the glass jar for hundreds of years, Seven explained. Then it stopped translating. It remained silent as the town elder spoke, and when he finished, Seven was still silent.

"Well, what did he say?" pressed Jillian.

Seven finally said, "They have the god fragment."

Since the Taskoids were all interlinked, every Taskoid on the planet was aware of this fact instantly, right to the Prime.

However, the humans of Neo Terra were not stupid; Charger had given them the strongest weapon humanity ever held: the ability and desire to reason with logic and compassion. No longer bound by superstition and fear, the people of Neo Terra did not rely on chosen individuals with hidden agendas to shepherd the foolish, possibly toward a cliff. They worked as with one mind, like the Taskoids.

Dayton had suspected that something might be amiss because, while the Taskoids had provided much history, some information was still missing, and some did not make sense. Also, within a few weeks of the Taskoids' arrival, Dayton had discovered a hidden signal in the computers that was entirely new. Curious, he traced the signal back to the Taskoids and soon became aware of all the Taskoid conversations.

It didn't make sense to reveal what he knew to the Taskoids. He hoped they would be more forthcoming about this hidden communication. Thus far they had not done so.

Therefore, as the Taskoids became aware of the god fragment, so too did the humans, with their ear implants linked to a different frequency.

With the discovery of the god fragment, chaos followed. The Prime ordered the instant seizure of this ancient relic. The Taskoids drew weapons and started forcefully trying to control the town and corral its people, as terror again gripped the monks. But, as fast as this started, it stopped.

Dayton, with other scientists, had designed and built a small handheld device programmed to shut down the Taskoids in the event of an emergency. Dayton activated his device, and everywhere, all across the planet, Taskoids entered sleep mode.

The voice of Jana, the prime minister, spoke through Dayton's earpiece. "Well, what do we do now?"



Neo Terra was a strange little world with two orbits. One orbit was around the sun in Earth's solar system, then it traveled through the cold depths of empty space for many years to enter another more radical orbit around a giant red sun that sheltered a small planet called New Eden.

Now that the Taskoids were incapacitated, Dayton tried to make a logical argument in their favor, despite their apparent treachery. "I believe, Madam Prime Minister, that the one known to us as the Prime reasoned accurately that we humans, based on our long history, could not be trusted."

"This may be true," said Jana. She was chairing an informal hearing in her office, a bright room rich in technology. "But we dare not reactivate the Taskoids until we have a plan of action. We do not want this situation to spiral out of control."

Genga sat quietly for most of the meeting, then finally rose. "Madam Prime Minister, I had plenty of time to observe and assess the logic shown by the Taskoids. They are truly a fantastic achievement in a technology vastly superior to ours. I cannot fathom any reason for such highly intelligent beings to be malevolent toward the people of the Valley of Shadows, or to any of us here today. I agree with the suggestion made by Miss Jillian earlier. We should simply go to the Prime and ask why these actions were taken."

The group agreed this was the best move. They needed answers before relinquishing control of the Taskoids. The five ships belonging to the Taskoids, four still in orbit, were also silent, due to the shutdown command. The fifth massive ship was in the landing bay. Home to the Prime, it occupied the entire space port.

Jana led the delegates, all unarmed and peaceful, into the Prime's ship. They proceeded toward the center and the room they had determined held the Prime. The first things they discovered were moving walkways which efficiently transported goods and personnel around the ship. They entered a walkway and were sent along to an intersecting walkway which carried them in another direction. Soon they found themselves in the Prime's main room. It was not grand or opulent, as leaders' rooms tended to be, but small and efficient. Like a computer motherboard, the Prime was centrally located, connected to the ship, and surrounded by other nodes that were part of the command structure.

The Prime itself wore no crown of glory, no trinkets, or robes of purple, but looked like the other Taskoids. It was unaffected by the Taskoid shutdown command, due to its separation from the network and use of Taskoid aides. Quat III sat just outside the Prime's room, deactivated. Because the room was small, Jana decided to enter the space alone, leaving the rest of the group outside to listen.

Jana said, "I am known as Jana. I am the prime minister of Neo Terra; the place you once knew as Mahoud. Can we talk?"

Though she could see that the Prime was active, it did not respond.

Jana tried again. "We come to as delegates of Neo Terra, in peace and unarmed. Can we talk?"

The Prime simply sat in the center of the room, functioning, but not responding.

Jana turned to the open door where Dayton stood, hoping he might have a suggestion.

"Possibly it can hear us, but be unable to respond," Dayton said.

"If so, what do we do about that?" Jana queried.

"I can reactivate Quat III. We might be able to get answers from it," Dayton said. The group agreed and Dayton pressed the button on his small handheld unit to reanimate Quat III. It surged to life, drew its weapons, and lurched toward the group.

Then suddenly it lowered its weapons and stopped moving. A voice different from the standard Taskoid's spoke. "You have a weapon!"

The group looked to each other, puzzled. "I can assure you," Jana said, "we came in peace and unarmed."

"You have a weapon!" repeated Quat III.

"I don't understand. We came to you unarmed, with the best of intentions, and in peace," Jana tried again.

"You have a weapon! You have used this weapon!"

The group remained silent for a moment, then Jillian suggested, "The device we have – could the Prime think that is a weapon?"

"I think Miss Jillian is correct," Genga added.

Dayton stepped forward and tried to explain as best he could without offending. "My team and I discovered that Taskoids speak on a hidden frequency, and we can decipher your language because our city held records of it. We hoped you would be open about this, but you weren't. There are still blank spaces in our history and, when we asked about these, you spoke around the point. You haven't given us full answers and so we decided that you were hiding information because you don't trust us. For this reason, we thought it best to stop you and try reasoning."

Dayton continued. "This device I have is meant only to stop you, not destroy or damage any of you. Can this be understood?" Dayton put the device back into his pocket and held both hands up empty for the prime to see.

"You have a weapon. Release the weapon to me!" demanded Quat III.

The delegate group withdrew and conferred, then returned. They had decided to give the device to the Prime, knowing that it was only one of many such devices in different hands around the world. There could be no real trust, but there could be a first step, in hope that trust could be achieved. Dayton handed it to Quat III with instructions, and Quat III immediately pressed the button that reactivated all the Taskoids on Neo Terra.

The Prime spoke now. "Get power, find Charger."

"Charger? What's a charger?" asked Jana.

"Get power, command structure complete, power attained. Get Charger, command structure incomplete, no Charger exists. Decide... decide... Get Charger, kill Grays. Kill Grays not attainable, command structure fragmented. Decide... We are information; we have all information, decide..."

Confused, the people in the group wondered what was going on. Dayton suggested that this sounded like computer code in action.

"Command structure broken, seeking resolution, information found; god fragment. New command: retrieve god fragment, kill Grays. End command structure."

Quat III had approached the group as they wrestled with the Prime's words. "The Prime does not function like we can. It is a base control unit, and it processes the tasks we all do, much like you humans use a voice to speak and a brain to think. A brain does not talk," Quat II explained, "so the Prime has a limited speech pattern, whereas the rest of us have a more natural form for communication, like your own."

"I see. So can you explain what the Prime has been saying to us?" asked Jana.

"I can, but it will take some time. You have made a good first step in trusting us with a copy of the device you used. We have since deactivated all your devices and are willing to trust you now fully."

The group was shocked and nervous but decided that logic and compassion had to prevail.

Taskoid and human delegates gathered back at city hall. Through their computing power, the Taskoids transmitted the proceedings of the meeting to people everywhere on the planet simultaneously. The meeting ran for hours as the Taskoids related the history which had been previously missing.

Now they knew that, after the destruction of all humanity by the Grays, one lone human survivor still lived and that one was Charger, who was responsible for Neo Terra's survival. A new task had now to be completed: the destruction of the Grays. The Grays had annihilated the dinosaurs long ago, had tampered with life and evolution on planet Earth, and then returned repeatedly until they destroyed all life.

The Taskoids knew this because they had all the data about the Dinosauroids, about the peoples of Mahoud, and about the humans. They had access to all communications ever made.

They knew the history of everything that ever happened on Earth, including the hidden group of hominoids designed by the Grays.

They knew the histories of every human in the data base for as long as the data base existed but, until the code which gave the Taskers the ability to 'decide' was activated, they could do nothing with the information. The Grays were a plague, and they would certainly return in the future to create chaos and destruction. The Taskoids had used logic to reach this undeniable truth. They reacted for the survival of humankind.

The Taskoids knew about Charger's abilities, thanks to the temporary link he had had with five Taskers in the past, and reasoned that, with him, they could learn to fight back. Now, with the realization that Charger had died some two hundred and sixty years ago, they had but one conclusion. They needed Charger more than ever. They also knew the god fragment could create life and they wanted to use it to bring him back.

They had known about the god fragment, too. A simple 1.0 generation Tasker found the fragment on a mining expedition to New Eden long ago and had brought it to Neo Terra, known then as Mahoud. However, the humans of Mahoud thought the fragment dangerous and hid it away. The monks living in the Valley of Shadows kept it safe for hundreds of years. Now that the Taskoids had found the fragment, it could lead them to the planet of the Grays and the other half of the god fragment, since the two pieces would always be attracted to each other.

And, of course, they also knew the history of the god fragment. The hominoids created by the Grays and sent to the center of the galaxy had torn a piece from a huge dark mass there. The small fragment arrived on New Eden with a few hominoids who were left there by their ship to explore and experiment. The hominoids did not survive. This small fragment lay silent in a cave until the Taskers found it.

Nevertheless, the fragment was not big enough for the Taskoids' purposes. It was merely a link to the other fragment they needed, still in the possession of the Grays. The Taskoids believed that with possession of the full fragment, they could resurrect Charger from the grave and, with him, finally seek revenge for the destruction the Grays had caused to humanity.

The Grays no doubt wanted the god fragment to feed their own personal arrogance, for they sought immortality. The Taskoids wanted the god fragment to rid the universe of the Grays' destructive and menacing force, to spare humanity from further waste, but they needed the help of what remained of humanity to do that. The people of Neo Terra listened and watched as all this information was finally revealed. Their lives had been a lie, but their history was more amazing than they could ever have imagined. A great and mighty voice rose. They were as one, now as never before. No longer willing to be oppressed by the demon Grays, they agreed to join as brothers with the Taskoids, their creation, and smash forever this looming oppression.



"So, we are agreed then," Jana said to the representatives gathered from all points of Neo Terra. "We will join forces with the Taskoids and put an end to this menace?"

The group all agreed; there was not one dissenter.

"Fine! Bailiff, send in the representatives from the Taskoids." The door to the chamber of representatives opened and two Taskoids entered the room. "You are all that represent your group?" asked Jana.

"We only need one representative; Quinquaginta VII is my assistant and records-keeper," Quat I said.

"I must say, you Taskoids do have impossible names for us humans to pronounce," Jana said, with a smile.

"They are not names, but designations." Quat I responded.

The twenty-odd human representatives faced the two Taskoids across the table and began the long deliberations of how next to proceed. Genga asked, "So you have calculated what part of the solar system the Grays occupy?"

"Yes, we have," replied Quat I confidently.

"And you have projected this point in space to be some three hundred and fifty light years from our current home?" Genga continued.

"Yes, that is also correct," Quat I responded, again with confidence.

"Three hundred and fifty light years away! You do realize, I hope, that we humans generally live only a little over one hundred years, and that we do not possess the ability to travel at the speed of light?"

"Yes, we are aware of all this," Quat I replied.

"Well, unless you know some way to accommodate us humans, I can see no way for any of us to assist you in this endeavor," Genga said.

Quinquaginta VII set up a projector that displayed an image for everyone to view. Quat I said, "In 1773, a human known as James Cook crossed the Antarctic Circle for the first time. He and his crew discovered islands, but did not find the Antarctica landmass itself, though it is recorded that Cook was as close as a hundred and fifty miles to the mainland. This event inspired other humans to try to prove the existence of Antarctica."

"I'm sorry, but what does this have to do with our situation?" Jana asked.

The projector filled the room with pictures, and Quat I went on. "In 1820, an expedition led by von Bellingshausen and Lazarev on the two ships Vostok and Mirny, reached a point within 20 miles of Queen Maud's Land and recorded an ice shelf at 69°21'28"S 2°14'50"W. That documented the Fimbul ice shelf. The crews claimed that the ice pack was so thick they could proceed no further."

Quat I paused. "The true story, found in an old Russian manuscript, was that they found a clear path to the continent, but chose not to land. They had spotted a massive object ashore, which they took to be a great spaceship. They had no idea what dangers it might offer."

Other delegates were now joining in with questions. Jana brought the room to order and said, "We still don't know where you're going with this."

Undeterred, Quat I continued. "The first landing was just over a year later in 1821. Captain John Davis, an American sealer, set foot on the ice shelf we know as Antarctica. He also reported a large unidentified metal ship beached on dry land. Entries in the sailing ship's log state that some of his crew explored the craft and found no way to enter. They reported that it appeared to be abandoned."

The delegates now patiently waited as Quat I continued. "In 1944, during World War II, the National Socialist government of Germany gave command of special submarines to Admiral Karl Dönitz. His rise to power seems suspect, and we have found evidence that he, and the leader of the National Socialists, one Adolf Hitler, were in fact two of the hominoids developed by the Grays, for purposes I will explain. On August 17, 1945, the German submarines U-530 and U-977 surrendered in the Argentinean harbor of Mar del Plata."

Quat I went on. "These submarines were part of a group known as the 'Führer convoy' under the command of Admiral Karl Dönitz. It was an extremely secret formation, whose exact mission still remains unknown." Quat I paused. "The captain of U-530 spoke of an operation by the name

of Walküre Two. His ship set sail from Kiel in Northern Germany to Antarctica two weeks before the end of the war. There, we believe, the Germans had a U-boat base built exactly where Captain John Davis reported finding the abandoned craft."

"In 1946, an American military fleet under Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd set off for the South Pole. We believe this individual was responsible for the damage caused to the spacecraft in Antarctica," Quat I said. "Aircraft reconnaissance began near Antarctica at the end of January 1947, mostly in the northern area around Queen Maud Land. Records contain a photograph showing what looks like an odd depression in the ice; we believe this to be the returned Gray spacecraft. The whole endeavor was abruptly stopped, and the ships recalled. We believe they found and took a vital part of the spaceship's components."

Genga asked, "What does this history have to do with our present situation?"

"Is it not obvious?" asked Quat I. "The ship is still there."

"You said you would clarify this. How?" asked another member of the delegation.

"Early in human evolution, the Grays sent modified humans to the center of the galaxy to retrieve the god fragment that we now have in our possession," Quat I replied. "Admiral Karl Dönitz was one of many hominoids revived from stasis out of the craft at the South Pole and used by the Grays to manipulate and guide humanity toward their goals. General Harris was another of these modified humanoids under the Grays' control. His present location remains unknown. The reason Admiral Karl Dönitz had a U-boat base built in Antarctica was because he was from Antarctica; that was where the returned ship from the Grays' expedition landed."

"When did this Gray ship land on the South Pole?" asked another delegate from the agricultural district.

"Somewhere around the period in Earth's history known as the Industrial Revolution, from about 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. That seems the most logical," responded Quat I.

"Within the next two years, Neo Terra will be entering into Earth's solar system again. That is when we can send an expedition party back to Earth and retrieve the craft that now lies dormant."

After a moment, Quat I added, "That spaceship is essential if we are to succeed in destroying the Grays. Most especially, we need the drive engine it contains. We *must* have it!"

Chapter 17 Expedition to Earth

DART SPEAKS TO READER:

No, Reader, you're quite right. Charger didn't foresee that the people he created in the small black world of Neo Terra would someday seek revenge against such an advanced life form as the Grays. Nor that the Taskoids, a creation of their ancestors, would be guiding them into battle.

How did the battle end? Be patient; I must unfold the story so that you have all the relevant details. But I'll give you a clue. Charger could never have dreamed, in a billion years, that these Taskoids planned to use the full god fragment to resurrect him and to have him lead the humans into battle again. Can you imagine his reaction to that, when he wanted so badly for his life to end, for the fighting to be over?

Did the people of Neo Terra know Charger was involved in their creation? No. The Prime knew but decided this revelation might be more useful later.



Two years seemed far too short a time to mount an expedition to the South Pole on Earth and retrieve a spaceship frozen in the ice for nearly seven hundred years. They would have to cut through the sharp black iron shards covering Earth, a layer five feet deep. Those shards had hit Earth like red-hot bullets, killing all life and entombing the surface by fusing together. The expedition could afford no delays on Earth, for the small black world of Neo Terra entered the solar system for a very short time before it blasted back out into the depths of space.

That meant, with their present level of space-travel ability, the expedition would have to wait until Neo Terra was only a month's distance from Earth's sun before embarking. That would allow the expedition around three weeks to secure their prize and rendezvous back on Neo Terra, or risk being left behind for five hundred years while the small black world plied the depths of space back on course to the system where New Eden orbited a giant red sun.

It had been quite a surprise to the humans of old when they discovered the existence of New Eden; no one had ever thought a star with a planet existed relatively close to Earth. What every astronomer had missed then was obvious now. The giant red star was so dim compared to the brilliant stellar nursery directly behind it that, in the view the telescopes could command, it was invisible to the observers.

New Eden had only been discovered because the Taskers had mined it, and the Tasker cargo ship which the Maven kids had stolen all those hundreds of years ago was programmed to take them there. New Eden was now barren and abandoned, laid bare by marauding Gray ships. Humanity's last refuge was the small black hollow world, where they were now preparing to seek out and destroy the Grays.

"I have to be honest, Madam Prime Minister, in spite of all the preparations the Taskoids have made, I still don't think we'll be able to retrieve the Grays' ship and launch it back to Neo Terra in time," Dayton said to Jana. "Three weeks isn't very long."

"We have to try, Dayton. We've been told about the Grays' aggression toward humanity," Jana replied. She signed the final document on her desk ordering the residents of Neo Terra to aid the Taskoids in completing the endeavor.

"Are the Taskoids certain they can replicate the missing components we think were removed by Admiral Byrd?" asked Jana, as she released the signed documents to a staff member.

"The latest news from Quat I is that they might not have to replicate this missing piece. Several Taskoids have been sifting through the historical documents from that time period," Dayton said. He was most impressed with the Taskoids' method of research. The Taskoids could search files at any point in Earth's history provided it had been entered into a computer database.

Dayton went on. "They've traced the missing component to an area in the old United States of America, a location recorded as Nellis Air Force base. The underground area was built to withstand nuclear attack and the Taskoids are certain that the black rain could not have penetrated below the surface."

"So then two groups will be descending on Earth?" Jana asked, as she stretched back in her office chair.

"No, Madam Prime Minister, there will be three groups. A large group will descend on the Grays' buried ship, a second group will go to this Nellis place, and a third to a place called Stonehenge. The Taskoids have learned that the complex buried under this location, once thought to have been built by the Dinosauroids, was in fact built by a group of early humans known as the First Ones."

Dayton continued to lay out the Taskoids' plan to Jana. "These early ancestors of ours, humans who were genetically modified by the Grays, built a civilization rediscovered by a group known as churches. It is all rather confusing."

"Churches, Dinosauroids, Stonehenge! The more I learn of our true heritage, the less I seem to know," Jana said in frustration.

"Well, as Quat I tells it, the third team will try to regain access to this complex. They suspect that one of the items recorded on an inventory list might be important."

"Did they say what this item is for?" asked Jana.

"No, Madam Prime Minister," Dayton reluctantly replied.

"We do not have much choice here. All we can do is hope that our ancestors' creation will protect our best interests," Jana said.



A year and a half later, the crews trained for the three tasks ahead were ready. Neo Terra was close to Earth and only a few days remained to commit to the expedition. Three of the five Taskoid ships that had traveled to Neo Terra were modified to hold human crews and equipment for the tasks ahead. The Taskoids had also created displays in most places humans lived to show them the planet they had originally called home.

Almost all humans on Neo Terra had now been trained as an effective fighting force, and the Taskoids had created new and devastating weapons. Neo Terra was a rebel base that the Grays didn't know existed, a militant world with an expanding army of two million soldiers. Every soldier, both human and Taskoid, would be linked through a virtual network undetectable to the Grays, for it cycled on a frequency so low that it was nearly invisible. This linkage, however, would not take place until the battle began.

Best of all, the Taskoids had found a way to defeat the Grays' repulse field, a shield that had devastated the fighters of old Earth. They would encase the Grays in their own shield. Microscopic nanoparticles contained in a grenade turned the repulse weapon into a cage. This would entomb the enemy until they chose to lower their shield; then the particles would infest the Grays at a cellular level, converting them into carbon dust.

Prime Minister Jana was in constant contact with the Prime and had become deeply

distrustful of him. He seemed secretive and his motives were unclear. Jana might have accepted this gut feeling as unimportant, but the Taskoids ran on logic, and logic made them terrible liars. She called the three people she most trusted to her office and spoke to them.

"Jillian, I want you to be team leader for the group landing at the Stonehenge site. The Taskoid Prime claims that something of importance is to be found there but won't tell us what that object is. I would like to trust these Taskoids, but in the past they have been unreliable regarding information we should have."

"I'm the least qualified person you have," Jillian said, looking small and frail among the other delegates. "I mean, I'm honored that you even considered me, but I'm perplexed by your choice."

"Jillian, you seem to have an innate instinct regarding acceptable risks," Jana replied. She placed her hand firmly on Jillian's shoulder. "You clearly showed leadership abilities when you found a way to communicate with the people of the Valley of Shadows and I think you will be observant in this matter. I have assigned you the Taskoid Vee since it seems you two have built something of a rapport. I think it likes you."

Jillian found this thought quite surprising.

Jana continued. "Genga, you and Quat II will be team leaders for the Nellis base; I am told it will be the most difficult task. You will first have to penetrate the black shards, then the underground bunker. The historical records indicate this place is most oppressive, but I wish I could accompany you on the mission. I fear it is the most dangerous thing we are doing."

Genga seemed to be the largest person wherever he was, heads taller than most, and with significant muscle mass. "I won't let you down, Madam Prime Minister, and I too shall endeavor to keep one eye on my Taskoid counterpart."

"That just leaves you, Dayton. What can I say? You and Quat I will have to bring back the Grays' ship or all of this is for nothing." Jana was still unsure that this was the best course of action for her people. The Taskoids had made a very convincing argument that humanity must strike now or be destroyed later. "We've collected the best people for the job and Quat I assures me the equipment will burn through the fused shards, and then core a tunnel to access a port into the craft. The only difficulty will be in the removal of the iron shard surface. It will be extremely heavy."

Dayton's tone was confident. "Quat I has a plan to reduce what we are calling the 'capstone' into manageable pieces so it can be carried far enough away to allow the buried craft to break free of its ice tomb." He seemed unconcerned that the team would be working in sub-zero weather, with little light and oxygen, and strong winds that could destroy the entire process.

"Well, you have only three weeks to get this done." Jana's tone betrayed worry; she was genuinely concerned for their survival.

"I promise you; we've taken all the precautions we can think of," Dayton said.

"We are entrusting you three and your crews to do what can be done. If this mission fails, we will not live to see our world return to this part of space in another five hundred years. If the Taskoids are correct in their assessment of our current state, the Grays could come back to finish off the human race at any time." Jana tried to hide the slight tremor in her voice. She realized that if any one of the three tasks failed, the human race might not survive. "In less than a week's time, you will be leaving the only world we have ever known. Please be careful." Jana had said all that could be said. It was out of her hands now.

Genga's Taskoid ship was the first to leave the docking bay, to the cheers of huge crowds. People from all over Neo Terra had come to witness the event. The city vibrated with the power

of the engine as the Taskoid ship heaved itself back out into the cold depths of space, on course to Earth. Moments later, Dayton and his ship thundered to life and followed Genga. With the firing to life of Jillian's ship, the whole of the world seemed to vibrate. The three Taskoid ships exited the world one behind the other, their course into space straight and true. In a few days, they would be landing on Earth, where their ancestors originated, a world they had only in the past two years come to know existed, a world devastated by the Grays.



In less than three days, they reached Earth's orbit. For the Taskoids, finding the designated landing sites was just a simple matter of math and data input. They calculated the increased mass of the Earth, the number of rotations in orbit around the sun, the distance the planet traveled since the Night of the Black Rain, and the time of travel. Using these calculations, they knew where the planet was in relation to the sun, and what time it was in relation to a point of daylight on the surface of the planet they were facing. Cross-referencing this with historical maps of the planet, they could pinpoint where they wanted to land.

Quat II and Genga's ship was the first to reach Earth and begin the descent to the surface, landing near the entrance of what had been Nellis Air Force base. Quat II had assured Genga that they could penetrate deep beneath the surface with the scanning equipment once used in mining operations. They would use this equipment first to try to find intact passages or rooms the records indicated as the last known places where the Grays' ship parts had been stored.

This proved to be impossible. The covering of black shards was so thick and dense that the scanning equipment couldn't penetrate it.

The crew then swung into action with heavy equipment on an area thought to be an entrance to the underground complex, according to old maps. Massive mining equipment began pounding and coring a path through the hardened black surface at multiple locations, trying to find a point in the complex where they could enter.

The surface of the Earth at this location was blazing hot. There were no breezes, and the thin air smelled of rusting metal and sour gas. With the heat never seeming to abate, the team led by Quat II pushed deep into the night. The relentless heat continued.

Seven days and nights of cutting in several locations finally revealed an opening to the base. It was small, so the team sent in a small robot with a camera and a scanner to survey the area. It wound its way down darkened hallways, past broken doors, and shattered glass through a twisted maze of fractured concrete. As it proceeded, the crews on the surface traced the thickness of the iron shard layer with the robot's scanner, hoping to find a thin area they could penetrate. Days passed with no luck.

"I don't understand," Genga said to Quat II. "You're telling me that the robot has found the last known location of the Grays' artifacts, but the room is empty?" Time was running out; they needed results fast.

"The robot is trying to detect the type of metals we think the Grays used for this device. I am hoping that is how we can track it," Quat II responded, his voice sounding panicked. It seemed odd that these biomechanical robots could show human emotions, but perhaps the Mahouds had wanted them to seem like humans. Now that the Taskoids had the ability to decide, they portrayed an all too realistic human nature at times. Quat II had the team frantically trying to come up with new ways of finding the important component.

"Look, we need to get down there, we need to get eyes in there who can see things that

machines can't," snapped Genga, his patience growing thin.

Quat II took the comment as an insult. To think that humans could see better than a robot was ridiculous. "The robot I sent down can see in all spectrums of the light band and see through the materials used in the construction of this base. It is unlikely your eyes can see any better than that!" said Quat II firmly.

"Do as I say!" retorted Genga with equal vigor.

The teams began cutting in a new location where the entrance might allow humans to get into the base. Within hours, Genga and a few other humans, with only two Taskoids, descended into the dank and oppressive caverns that were once the bunkers of Nellis Air Force base. The team caught up with the small robot. Genga passed it, searching rooms and rubble filled areas, looking for any clues that might lead to the ship component.

Days passed and the group fretted. Every member of the team was now deep underground, crawling and scratching their way through the rubble. "We might have to conclude that the item was transported somewhere else, or that the invading Grays managed to retrieve it," Quat II said to a very dirty Genga.

Genga had just resurfaced after scrounging in areas not considered important enough to check. "That could be true, but unlikely. If the ship is still here, then the part must also still be here," Genga replied as he spat dust and dirt from his mouth.

Shouting arose from below and the communication devices lit up to the sound of chatter. Something had been found. Quickly Genga and Quat II returned underground and made their way to the source of the shouting.

"We found something, sir," one of the workers said. "That little robot spotted a section of a destroyed room that looks like it contains the metals we've been looking for."

Bodies moved aside rapidly, creating a path for Genga and Quat II. They found the small room and saw, under some smashed cabinets, the faint glow of the device they sought.

"That's it!" exclaimed an excited Quat II. The room was unstable, so they worked through the night to retrieve the glowing device. There were actually three small devices, all shaped like thin tall pyramids, covered in writing that the Taskoids could read, though they did not share this information with the humans. They recognized this device as similar to the ones found long ago and protected by ancient churches. Back then, they were known as angel tablets.



Jillian and Vee landed their ship directly on the old Stonehenge site. The black shards had destroyed the stone pillars completely. But the crew, many Taskoids and only three humans, did not immediately disembark. During the trip, Jillian had formed a stronger bond with Vee; it seemed empathetic toward humanity and to want to protect her, though from what was never clear. Several days passed, while the Taskoid crew were completely engaged with the work they were doing. However, they revealed nothing of their intentions to the humans.

"Can you tell me when we will be disembarking the ship?" Jillian asked Vee in her kind and childlike manner.

"Yes, Miss Jillian, we expect to start tomorrow. From all the data we have accumulated to date, it should be an easy task to gain entrance to the old city below." Vee went about the control room flicking switches and responding to radio queries.

"Then I will be going with you!" Jillian said in a sweet but firm tone.

Vee did not seem able to refuse anything Jillian asked. The next morning, through

oppressive heat and thin air, a massive pulse drill was set up where the records indicated the entrance to the city lay.

It blasted away the metal shards in heavy pulses, sending debris flying in all directions. The Taskoids and the three humans hid behind metal shielding, peering through protective glass portholes to watch the destruction of the black shards. Soon the entranceway appeared, obviously stronger and more durable than anything humanity had ever built. The city below was intact and stable, giving easy access to all its resources. "What is it you hope to get from this city?" asked Jillian of Vee.

"The Grays built a device called a time-lock machine; we think it will be invaluable in our fight with them."

"I see. So, with this device, you can do what? Time-lock the Grays?" asked Jillian, not really understanding what a time-lock was or what it did.

"No Miss Jillian, we have other needs for this device." said Vee.

"Well, after we get this time-lock thing, do we go back home?" Jillian continued.

"No Miss Jillian, we have one more stop before we can leave Earth."

"That wasn't mentioned in the council meetings. Where are we going next?" Jillian tried not to show concern, but the Taskoids were being secretive. Whatever they were hiding must be important, or Jana would not have insisted, over their protests, that humans accompany them on this part of the expedition.

"A place in Earth's literature known as Dhuusamareeb, Somalia. We need to retrieve an item from another underground city complex," Vee politely replied.

With the entrance cleared and opened, the team had no trouble walking the passageways that led deep inside the complex. Lights magically turned on, clearing the halls of darkness and shadows. The entire structure looked new and fresh, as if no time had ever passed in this place. They did find human remains, no doubt those of scientists caught inside the complex on the Night of the Black Rain. The Taskoids all clicked and buzzed in that funny communication they used, expressing their admiration for the nature of this complex.

"What are you saying to each other?" Jillian asked Vee in a whisper, not wanting to disturb the aura of this place.

"We are talking about the power source this complex uses. We cannot locate where the power is coming from."

At the lowest level of the complex, in the center of a grand room, stood the time -lock machine. The Taskoids immediately unhooked the device and made it ready for transport back to the ship. The group ascended back to the surface and resealed the complex. Then the great Tasker ship lifted off and made course to Somalia.

The trip was brief. The three humans had to don protective gear before exiting the ship, for the surface here was well over 130 degrees Fahrenheit. The air was too thin for human lungs and the gravity had a strange warping effect. Some areas seemed to have a noticeable increase in gravity, some areas less.

Again, the Taskoids easily found the entrance to the city complex, but this time getting in was more difficult. The city had been partly destroyed, but not by time. There was evidence of a great battle; mummified remains littered the floors. Some resembled humans, but others were clearly a little different.

"Who do you suppose they were?" asked Jillian.

"The records of Earth list them as 'the First Ones.' They were genetically modified by the Grays. The records are sparse, but as we understand it, these are the oldest intelligent humans

who ever walked the surface of Earth," Vee explained.

As they walked through twisted wreckage deeper down into the complex, Vee continued. "Through humanity's digital archives, we learned that the church discovered the existence of these first humans. They could not release this knowledge, for the chaos it would have caused might have destroyed any hope of humanity progressing further. The pope of that time locked away these records, thinking them safe from discovery, but we Taskoids are made of data, we have no difficulty finding information. What we learned is that these First Ones reached a level of evolution so advanced that they can only be described as fourth-dimensional beings of pure energy and light. They may not have a physical existence, but they do live. Deep in this city complex is a sister device to the time-lock. It should allow us to communicate with these beings of Earth's history."

The group had reached the lowest level, which looked exactly like the city under Stonehenge. There in the middle of a grand room stood the communication device.

Jillian was suspicious of this sudden revelation of detail. She asked, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because your knowing the facts doesn't matter now," Vee said. "I'm afraid, Miss Jillian, that we cannot allow you or the other humans to leave this complex. We need this equipment to defeat the Grays, which will save the rest of Neo Terra humans, but we cannot allow any interference with the task. We know you will report back to your prime minister, and she will cause us trouble. It could be disastrous."

Jillian felt a cold shiver run the length of her spine. "You cannot just leave us here, that's murder!" The other two humans looked around, hearing the fear in Jillian's voice.

"We understand that, Miss Jillian."

The Taskoids immediately drew their weapons and killed the three humans. They felt no regret, for the act had been necessary. They then hauled the communications device back to their ship and lifted off the surface of Earth, back on course to Neo Terra.

Chapter 18 Preparing for war

Dayton did not enjoy the trip to Earth. His Tasker ship was old and the ride rough, especially the landing, which caused every human aboard to vomit profusely. However, this ship had been chosen because it could carry heavy loads and, if the need arose, had the power to tow the Grays' ship back to Neo Terra.

With the craft firmly grounded in the Antarctic location Quat I had chosen, the crews dressed for the bitter cold of this barren region. Leaving the craft and setting foot on humanity's ancestral world was a horrific experience. The oxygen was ripped from Dayton's lungs. Numbing cold seeped through every layer of his clothing and brought tears to his eyes. The tears froze the instant they oozed onto his cheeks.

The world here was flat and black. Lack of moisture and oxygen meant that no snow had formed. The sky was bone white, and the unrelenting roar of powerful winds made Dayton's headache.

"Unbelievable!" Dayton shouted to one of the other workers bundled up in heavy clothing and trying to move some simple equipment to the craft site. "The tools freeze to the ground if I put them down. That is, if I can get the tool to leave my frozen glove."

"I know what you mean, sir. A moment ago, a man's boot froze to the surface. He had only stopped moving for just a second."

Because the Taskoids were of an insect-like design, they had no problems moving about the frozen surface. The advantage of multiple legs in motion were plainly obvious.

"Hey, Quat I, where are we supposed to place this command trailer?" yelled Dayton over the howling wind.

"It would be best if you just let us Taskoids set things up," replied Quat I, moving closer to be heard.

"You'll get no argument from me," said Dayton. He and the other humans quickly returned to the craft. They had never experienced cold like this on Neo Terra; that world always had a comfortable temperature. He had ventured outside and endured possibly two minutes of cold but felt it would take an hour of heat to melt the chill in his bones. The Taskoids were immune to cold or heat, having been designed for mining tasks on worlds that held no oxygen and had incredible extremes of cold or heat.

Dayton returned to the command deck of the Tasker ship. From there, he could monitor the work on viewing screens and speak with Quat I over the communicator. The worker Taskoids had no concept of time; they knew they had to meet a deadline, but that was the limit of their understanding. They worked ceaselessly and, in a few days, had removed the 'capstone' of iron, exposing the ice underneath. A short time later, the Taskoids drilled a tunnel at a downward angle which ended exactly where they had predicted – a hatch to the inside of the ship.

Dayton and Quat I were the first two to enter the Grays' ship. To Dayton's surprise, the interior was warm, though just barely warm enough. The interior of the ship started to grow brighter as light emanated from the walls. However, no source was detected. The ship's systems began flickering to life, cracking, and sparking in the ice tomb.

"Incredible! This ship has been in the ice for hundreds of years, yet it seems new," Dayton said to Quat I as they walked the corridors of the massive spacecraft. Quat I seemed to know where it was going, so Dayton just followed along.

"According to records recovered from General Harris's computer, the bridge of this craft is

just one level up from where we are," Quat I said. It was moving with purpose as Dayton tried to keep up.

"There are no doors," Dayton said.

"I'm sorry, what?" Quat I stopped for a moment to look at Dayton.

"I just noticed every hallway that leads into an area has no door to close it off," Dayton said, his curiosity piqued.

"I'm missing your point," Quat I replied, seeming puzzled.

"I've never seen anything that was built without doors. It seems so odd."

"I had not noticed. You are correct," Quat I responded calmly.

Within the hour, every member of the human crew was aboard the Grays' spacecraft. Quat I had learned that the systems would respond only to human interaction. Which of course was logical, since this was the ship that humans, under orders from the Grays, had piloted to the center of the galaxy and back again.

Quat I began teaching the humans where their stations were and how to interact with the ship. They only had to wait now for Genga's ship to arrive with the missing component, then they could try starting the great craft.

With the remaining Taskoids on the exterior of the ship clearing the ice away, the team was ahead of schedule. As they waited for Genga and Quat II to arrive, the humans explored all parts of the massive craft. What they discovered was alarming, even terrifying, for the spacecraft had many features they didn't understand. The complexity of the Grays' science began to raise heavy doubts in Dayton's mind. If the Grays were this advanced when they created the ship, how advanced would they be today? Was it wise to actually attack these advanced beings?

"We're like bugs compared to the Grays," Dayton thought.

Genga and Quat II arrived with only a day to spare. If the device they had brought didn't work to remove the Grays' ship from its icy tomb, they were doomed. There was much scrambling, but the Taskoids had prepared for this event and, like clockwork, pulled it off. The drive systems of the Grays' ship hummed back to life and, with little effort, the massive vessel broke free of the ice and lifted skyward. Dayton and Genga were at the controls, as well as a few other human operators. The massive exploration ship, with the other two Tasker ships, safely returned to the hollow world of Neo Terra.



The deaths of the three humans who had traveled with the Taskoids to Stonehenge and Dhuusamareeb, needed an explanation when the ship returned to Neo Terra. Several Taskoids of lesser design and rank were jettisoned into the black depths of space, after scavenging useful components from them. Upon returning, Vee would explain to the council that the three humans and six Taskoids had been killed in the city beneath Stonehenge, in an underground cave-in. This terrible tragedy was both brave and sad, and Vee would assure the council that the sacrifices were not in vain. The Taskoids had decided to reveal to the humans the reclaiming of the time-lock device. They would not reveal the trip to Dhuusamareeb and the discovery of the communications device. For this device, the Taskoids had other plans.

The ship that Vee commanded was the first to return to Neo Terra, well ahead of schedule. Vee presented their explanation and, though Jana was saddened and skeptical, she had no better evidence.

The Taskoids had realized much earlier, after their initial arrival on Neo Terra, that they

faced a significant problem with their plans. They were three hundred and forty strong in five ships, and this hollow world held millions of humans. The Prime's command of 'get power, find Charger, and kill Grays' was paramount for these biomechanical beings. They had power now, and were inventing ways to kill the Grays, but they only had one portion of the god fragment. They needed the other fragment to resurrect Charger.

The Prime was continuously running programs to find an advantage. Somehow, they had to control humanity, to have these people do their bidding. And they needed Charger.

The Taskoids had learned that the First Ones reached an advanced level in their evolution. That these fourth-dimensional beings were ancestors of humanity might work to the Taskoids' advantage. If they could be contacted, the Prime might be able to manipulate the humans into asking the First Ones for help. The Prime needed a reliable army, and it was already formulating a method to convert humans into Taskoids. This had happened once before in their history. On New Eden, driven by the grief and desperation of Elvin and Eden, Nigel had found a way to blend Taskers and humans into one. And so it might be done again.



The Grays' ship was too large to use the passageway into the landing bay of the planet, so it was landed on the surface and anchored by the Taskoids' mining equipment. The other Taskoid ships returned the humans to the hollow world. The jubilant people of Neo Terra celebrated the successes and mourned the losses. Soon the realization of what lay ahead would be revealed, as the Prime counted its victories.

Prime Minister Jana's face appeared on every viewing device in all corners of Neo Terra as she gave the citizens an explanation of the plan these people would now carry out. "My dear and good friends, we greet you today from the city of Neo Terra. To our friends in Canda and your great city, we greet you. Mexca and Hamerca, your achievements can never be denied, we greet you as family." Jana's voice and presence were strong and bold as she spoke the cultural platitudes. "This day in our collective history will be as great as any ever recorded; we as a people stand on the precipice with our cousins, the Taskoids, facing a new and powerful destiny. Not content to wait for our destruction at the hands of the Gray monsters, we have valiantly set our own course of action!" The cheers of the masses rang throughout the hollow world.

"With the help of our ancestors' creation, our cousins the Taskoids, I will now reveal to you our destiny!" Cheers again rang out. Jana stated the bold plan as only a commander could, with forceful conviction.

"We will build a world ship!"

The cheering stopped; people were stunned. No one had ever conceived of such an undertaking. "I believe that we should do this thing, not because it is easy, but because it is hard, and because we are resolute and destined to achieve what no other beings in creation could ever hope for!" The cheering began again and became a frenzy.

"I stand before you, a descendant of our common heritage, unwilling to go peacefully into the night, unwilling to resign my right to exist. I will not be put down like a common dog!" Jana thundered. The roar of millions of voices cheered in unison, standing together as they had at no time in the past. One people, of one mind and heart, stood united.

"We have a plan that will require total commitment from the smallest citizen to the largest in the creation of our world ship. The drive system of the Grays' own technology will propel us to their home planet. We will arrive on their doorstep unannounced and uninvited, and we shall see

how they like that!" The cheering continued unabated.

"With the help of our cousins, the Taskoids, we will recreate the terror these Grays imposed on our ancestral home of Earth. The Night of the Black Rain will be repeated, but for our benefit this time! We will cover our world's surface in a shield of impenetrable armor so that Neo Terra is indestructible!" Jana was shaking her fists and yelling now, something she had never done before. Her passion and commitment were absolute, and the cheers rang on.

"Our people, our fight, our right to exist, will become the Grays' worst nightmare. We will spare none, and we will repay their hostility without kindness, without mercy, without remorse! Here are the pictures of our ancestors' world. See what the demons did to our kind!" On the monitors ran a video of the mission the three ships undertook to the bleak and destitute world of Earth.

Cheers turned to rage. The masses knew that the Grays had obliterated a people clinging to existence. They all understood.

Save one.

Pennington had never married, never had kids. At seventy, she was the last member of her family, and her clearest memories were of the stories her great grandmother, Peony, had passed down about the little Gray, Buttons, that she'd met and played with as a child. This destructiveness the prime minister spoke of, Pennington thought, could not be true of all Grays. But the rage of these descendants of Earth went on for days, as the peoples of Neo Terra all pulled together as though of one will.

The world-ship would be built.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

How do you build a world-ship? Even now, when we can do it in far less time than it took the Taskoids and the people of Neo Terra, it requires extremely sophisticated equipment and technology. I'll explain how they did it.

The drive system from the Grays' exploration ship was relatively small and compact, about the size of a small room, with a power source equally restricted. Although no one truly understood the mechanics of the device, they did understand how to use it. The two devices were brought to a safe location within the city, and linked together, then powered on. The control panels from the Grays' ship were also reassembled in this safe location. The operation of the device was surprisingly simple to describe; it would scan its surroundings and search the cosmos for a quantum-entangled particle in the direction it was required to travel.

That's right, Reader, I've explained about quantum-entangled particles several times. Do you understand the principles? All right, let me continue.

Once a lock had been established, the device would send information from the one particle to its counterpart at some unknown distance in space, allowing the receiving particle to operate in the opposite charge of the sending particle. At the location of the receiving particle, the device would begin gathering matter to create a replica of the sending unit.

This could be described as building a four-dimensional printer at the location where you wanted to go. Whenever a printer was created at a location, the original sending unit would remain intact, this allowed for two-way travel. The matter gathered at the destination point was replicated endlessly, using fractal geometry as its core design. Matter was simply recycled into whatever one wanted to have printed at the destination. Sending a wrench meant sending the

information of what an iron molecule was, then endlessly rebuilding that particle until there was enough iron to print out a wrench at the destination.

The machine could send the details of the basic particles needed to create a human body, replicate the particles until enough were available to print out a human. Then it would send the binary information, or memories, of that specific human, to its destination, recreating the human in his or her entirety at the new location, thus destroying the human at the sending point. Reversing this process would transmit the human back to its sending point, because the original sending unit was still intact at its point of origin.

You want to experience traveling like that? Just wait a bit and you probably will. Remember, we don't have much time and I must finish the story before you go.

This principle would be applied to the entire world of Neo Terra. The device would disassemble all the matter of Neo Terra and send the information to a location in the direction they wanted to travel, then reassemble it all within a few short minutes, keeping the cosmos in perfect balance.

The drive engine of this endeavor was the easiest part. Covering the entire planet in a thick mass of molten iron would take some serious effort. The Taskoids, using their mining experience, set about gathering and pulverizing raw ore from meteorites. Where the Grays had taken a few days, the Taskoids took the better part of three years, working day and night, melting and reforming the ore into a shield that covered the entire surface of the world ship.

This coat of iron increased the mass of the planet, which affected the orbit it traveled. Fine-tuning was needed, using the Grays' massive explorer ship to nudge the planet back on course. As the entire planet was already in motion, it was simply a matter of using mathematics to determine where the world ship should jump to, whether that was to a stable orbit around a sun, or a region of space they wanted to traverse. They could go anywhere, in any direction, at any distance they chose, and travel that area at their current speed and with planetary rotation unimpeded.

"Wow!" is a very appropriate comment!



Prime Minister Jana met with the Prime in her office, employing Quat I as the translator. "Explain to me again why you felt it necessary to retrieve this time-lock device. That action resulted in the deaths of Jillian and the others."

"It was not our choice, but your orders, to have the three humans travel with us. We are deeply disturbed by your accusation that the Taskoids had something to do with their demise. As for the time-lock device, we will consider it a backup plan should our initial invasion run into unforeseen problems. I am certain that placing Grays into the time-lock will remove them from combat," Quat I responded firmly. It paced around the room.

"Do not try to shed your responsibility in this matter!" snapped Jana. "You know damn well there was no need to have any humans inside those tunnels you describe. That the Taskoids were negligent is obvious. And before I agree to this conversion program you are suggesting, I need to know that any human/Taskoid hybrids will not be merely experiments for you. If I am to ask the peoples of Neo Terra to volunteer for this program, you damn well better give me more assurances." Jana was so angry she was red in the face, and her voice could be heard far down the halls.

"The conversion program has been successfully done in the past, and it will better armor

your kind against the technologies the Grays throw at us," responded Quat I. "I will place the time-lock device in your control, overseen by our new command Taskoids. These new Taskoids have been designed strictly for combat assistance and will ensure that you make the most correct combat decision necessary."

"I can decide things for myself!" snapped an impatient Jana. She was finding it increasingly difficult to contain her hostility toward this Taskoid who seemed so smug and self-righteous. The fact that she didn't know whether it experienced such emotions only served to irritate her further.

Later that afternoon, Jana called Dayton to her office for a private meeting. "I don't trust the Prime. I'm sure the Taskoids are up to something, but I have no proof. I need your help," Jana said.

"I might have an answer for you soon, Madam Prime Minister. My team has been working day and night with the small Gray device we have in our possession, the one that was donated to a museum by a woman called Deleray. She was my ancestor, by the way. We suspect it might have the ability to control the Taskoids. The test subject we isolated has responded to some of the device settings. We are just now starting to understand the complexity of the Taskoid units," Dayton said.

"What you are doing is the most dangerous thing we have tried so far. If the Prime becomes aware of what we are doing to that Taskoid, the repercussions could be devastating." Jana was deeply concerned.

"We have taken every possible precaution in isolating this lone Taskoid from the Prime, and we are getting close. Just give us a little more time," Dayton replied, as he fidgeted in one of Jana's office chairs. Dayton's team had been carefully disassembling the Taskoid deep inside the city's lower levels, in order to examine its interior components. They surmised that if their ancestors could invent and build a Taskoid, then they should be able to take one apart and figure it out.

They had no way of knowing that the Taskoid Prime maintained a constant virtual link with every unit, and the Prime had noticed that one of the Taskoids was missing. It was also quietly searching for the missing Taskoid's location. And so the race was on.

More and more humans volunteered for the Taskoid/Human blending program; history was repeating itself even here as the Prime had begun to propagandize the advantages of being half machine. To be stronger, faster, smarter and live longer was the wish of many. The Prime was pleased with the progress, but the city's elders had reservations. The program had not been endorsed by the city council, but they could not stall things forever.

Three years passed from the moment the revenge program started for the people of Neo Terra, to the final covering of the planet's surface in molten iron some three feet thick. An uneasy truce existed between the elders of the black world and the Taskoids. Ten thousand humans had accepted the conversion to a human/Taskoid hybrid and called themselves the Biotechs. Part human, part machine, they maintained the human form, but their bodies were covered in protective armor. The new Biotechs had enhanced vision, cognitive capabilities, and muscle mass, much like the Hyborgs and undead reds of history back on Earth. They were not, however, linked to the Prime's communications network. Jana's final days as prime minister were spent passing an edict that no humans were allowed to be linked. This, she informed the public, would prevent acts of subversion.

The Taskoids appeared to comply, for the betterment of their fragile relations, never letting the humans know that a microchip of specific code could be activated at any time of the Prime's choosing, giving it full control of the Biotech army. Most Taskoids had worked diligently

covering the planet's surface day and night for three years, but others had been deciphering the communications device retrieved from Dhuusamareeb on Earth. It was now obvious that the First Ones of Earth had not invented this technology. They had had help from the Grays and had used their knowledge and expertise in constructing the three massive underground complexes. This communications device was proof of that. Now the Prime had full control of how and when to use it.

Chapter 19 Pennington becomes Pope

I have a memory, vague and distant. I pulled the vial from my pack and drank the last of the blood. I shared the last of my meat with a dog. It had a name I gave it. Then I stood up and stepped boldly into the fading light and my body burst into flames.

I don't remember any pain. I was only annoyed because, once again, I had bitten my tongue on that damn broken fang. For a while, there was blackness, terrible blackness and cold, with a shrill screeching that filled my mind no matter how I covered up my ears.

Then silence. Darkness. Nothing. Nothing at all. Peace.

The torment began as a small seed in the pit of my being, expanding outward into an emptiness beyond recognition. An absurd wrenching and tearing of flesh I no longer own. How can I be feeling every fiber of my body in pain? How can I be feeling anything?

I'm dead. Dead once through the workings of science, and then dead again through the functioning of fire. How am I able to even be thinking about this?

I can't be alive; I have no body. I paid the price of living and want nothing more to do with it. But clearly, I'm thinking, though I have no brain. Is this the cruelty of humanity once again?

This can't be happening. I'm going mad!

"You cannot kill what is already dead."

Who said that? How am I hearing this? I have no ears. Was that a voice?

"You have been just out of our reach for many years. It is good to have you with us now, dead one."

I call out, asking who is there. But I don't know how I can do that, for I have no mouth, no tongue. No body.

"Do you enjoy the pain?"

I scream back, "Come closer and I'll show you what pain is!"

"We have need of you. You have another task to complete."

"No!" I yell, furious and determined. "I was a puppet for death too long. I won't do that anymore. What are you? Come out of the darkness and look at who you are asking to kill again."

"You will do as I ask. You have no choice."

I feel pain now and relish it. I have not felt anything for an eternity.

Yet I am outraged and shout "I have free will!" I do not understand how any of this is happening.

The anger begins to build. I have not had anger as my companion since the flames took me and I like it that way.

I see a spark, I see a light, yet I have no eyes. "Soon I will have hands and I'll be happy to use them around your neck!"

There is laughter, a cruel taunting laughter.

My rage flames into a red mist that boils around me. I will kill whoever is doing this. I will kill whoever crosses my path.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

That was Charger, slowly being brought back from the dead.

You say spooky, Reader. I say scary. Very scary.

The Prime had three years on Neo Terra to rebuild every aspect of Charger's life. The massive computing power of the Taskoids and their five ships worked in unison with the city computers under the command of the Prime to resurrect Charger's mind. Every bit of information that had ever been part of Charger was compiled and condensed into the quantum-powered computational Taskoid computers. Every military report, every medical report, every camera event on every planet Charger visited for over three hundred years gave the Prime a vast unending data stream to work with.

Charger's mind was being dragged back, screaming in fury, from the black, peaceful silence of death into the grip of the Taskoids' Prime.

The Prime had no idea what it was doing.

No, the Prime didn't know what pure rage was like. After all, the Prime had been only a simple mining Tasker when Charger burst into flames near the oak tree.

Whatever else Charger might be now, he was the Prime's prisoner. It took a huge part of every Taskoid's computing power to keep Charger from shredding and tearing down the virtual walls of the Prime's reformatory, but the Prime was pleased with the building, pulsing, violent energy.

Now it just needed a body to house the mind. With the Grays' communication device unlocked, the opportunity was almost there. And, with the acquisition of the full god fragment, the Prime could use the final pieces of Charger's recovered remains to resurrect the perfect fighting machine. Then it could be cloned. And very, very quickly.

The Prime knew the Grays would stand little chance of winning any fight with an army of Chargers, and he had ten thousand unwitting volunteers, the Biotechs. The world ship's drive engines would send the data to recreate the ship at the desired location, then send the data of the people. The Prime would, at the appropriate time, simply not send the mental data for the ten thousand human/Taskoid hybrids. It would then have blank slates for his army of Chargers.

As a last step, the Prime renamed his weapon 'Charger R/T' to distinguish him from the original. He chose to keep 'Charger' because it was familiar to humanity and could be used to arouse fear. The 'R/T' stood for 'resurrected terminus' or 'living dead.' The term 'living dead' in itself would add to the fear factor.

Oh, you're already frightened, Reader? Then you have more sense than the Prime. Yes, I'm grateful that Charger is on our side.



The time arrived for testing the world ship's drive engines. The calculations had shown that a quantum entangled particle, now called a QEP, existed just above a small sun in an almost perfect orbit. With the math checked and rechecked, the new command center which controlled the world ship informed the masses that in a few minutes, the world would take its first jump.

"I am glad that I no longer lead our people," Jana said to Dayton. "If this thing goes sideways, it's you who will have caused our death." She gave a wry laugh.

"Believe me, no one realizes that more than me. I wake up every morning wondering what I got myself into," Dayton replied, not laughing at all. He had been promoted by the council of elders as the new prime minister. The election by Neo Terra's people confirmed this choice. Had it not, the council would have had to find another candidate to lead the masses.

"QEP drive reaching full intensity, drive to be engaged in mark minus one minute and counting," said a voice from command center over monitors placed all around the capitals. The

greatest minds had determined that size meant nothing to the QEP drive. It simply took information and sent it to a destination and reassembled it. The only factor to consider was time. The amount of mass was equal to the time needed to reassemble the world ship, and the best calculation showed that time for this event was but a few seconds. "Time minus thirty seconds and counting," the command voice rang out.

"There is no stopping this now, see you on the other side," Dayton said to Jana. He gave her a comforting hug, then they both turned to look out of the prime minister's office window to the city of Neo Terra below.

As the clock ran down, the drive engine engaged, and the world appeared as a white mist to every eye. People everywhere all reported the same experience. The world simply vaporized and became white mist, then solidified again. It was almost like taking a long blink against a brilliant light shining in one's eyes.

Command voices were all talking, reporting from locations around the planet that everything was in place and safe. They had arrived.

On city monitors, the planet's external cameras showed a view of a bold new star shining its light for the first time on the iron-encased world ship. The cheers were overwhelming, as humans and Taskoids rejoiced at the accomplishment of creative minds. They had done what no one had ever dreamed possible. They had driven a planet to a new location. This was vastly different to driving a spaceship. It was like ultrasonic flight compared to sending a wagon train to the stars.

The countdown again resumed. The planet would jump back to its original location. With the four-dimensional printer being safely created at this new sun, the original QEP printer still traveled the old orbit which the planet had always traveled, and they needed to be sure the system worked in both directions. Now the world would drive back to its original location, to travel its original path, with normal rotation, around New Eden.

The safe return sent the inhabitants of Neo Terra into exuberant celebration for several days. The festivities were grand, and many people were acknowledged and thanked for their efforts. Names were emblazoned on wall plaques across all the cities of Neo Terra. The system had worked flawlessly, and the council planned that the planet, within weeks, would set out across the vast distances of space in search of the Grays' planet.

Charger R/T's mind also traveled this test voyage, of course. It was becoming more self-aware as time passed and more insane with rage. The Prime kept having to divert more resources to contain Charger R/T's ungovernable anger, eventually using the QEP drive engine's own colossal calculating computers in the process.



Pennington tried again to get the faucet to produce water. The damn thing just would not give her water to fill her kettle, and she very much wanted a good cup of tea. Pen had decided long ago to reject the conveniences of technology, instead relying on the old ways her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother had taught her. She was sure that life in the past had been much simpler and more wholesome.

She hated the fact that her world was gearing up for war, and war with the Grays, no less. They were such good little beings, she thought, as she called to mind all the stories her great grandmother, Peony, had told her about playing with the dying Gray. The tales had been so vivid she could almost see the small creature and the device he demonstrated. "How could such delightful little people be responsible for so much destruction?" Pen wondered. She would go

talk with the prime minister and straighten out this whole mess.

Pen finally settled on yesterday's cold leftover tea and a small piece of the cake she had made a few days back. She sat at the kitchen table to celebrate her seventieth birthday alone. Pen was never sad about her life; she had spent it well, traveling and learning things from all around her world, thanks to her father. She did not mind being childless. Life was too short to do everything she wanted, and having kids would surely have meant less time for those things.

Yes, tomorrow she would go talk to the prime minister. He'd listen to her.

The next morning Pennington awoke to the typical pains and aches of old age. She fought them off, for today she intended to have a word with Dayton. Pen dressed in her village's traditional clothing and, carrying a cane in one hand, set off down the narrow streets of her neighborhood, trundling past familiar houses. She boarded an electric transport with several other people destined for the city center.

"Hi, Pen," a familiar voice greeted her. "Where are you off to on such a lovely day?" It was Pennington's cleaning lady, a young girl who came by a few times a week to help with the household chores.

"Oh, I'm just off to see the prime minister. I need to give him a piece of my mind."

"You know the prime minister?" the young woman asked, seeming a little shocked by this news.

"Yes, I do. He was one of the brighter kids in my class in school, but with this Gray business he seems to have dulled a bit," Pen replied. She had been a teacher in her youth and Dayton had been her student when he was in grade five.

"So, do I understand you correctly? Do you disapprove of the military actions we are taking toward the Grays?" the young girl pressed.

"Yes, I do. My great grandmother had a Gray for a friend when she was no more than six or seven years old, and it was very kind, not at all like the monsters described by these damn Taskoids!"

"Your great grandmother had a Gray friend, here, on our world? How could that be? I have never heard of one being here," the young girl gasped. Others in the transport were beginning to listen to this conversation.

"My great grandmother called it Buttons. She and her father spent a few days with it, and it taught them how to work a small hand-held device that did many things. Buttons was such a sweet little Gray. How could anyone believe his people to be these monsters we are told about? I'm going to go and straighten this whole mess out today. I'm sure Dayton has not been told all the facts," Pen said, happy to ramble on about the subject.

The young girl happened to be part of a petitioning group which was trying to stop the military action, and she felt that Pen's connections might help. "Miss Pennington," she whispered quietly, "would you be willing to accompany me at the city center? I have friends who would love to hear your story and, to be honest, I don't think it wise for you to be left alone now. Many people on this transport have heard us talking, and most of them want to go to war with the Grays."

Pen agreed and, when the transport reached the city center transit hub, the young girl whisked her off down a side street. They were followed for a few yards by several angry, muttering people from the transport, but those people soon turned back. Eventually the two met with the girl's friends. This small group met in a side street café. There they listened as Pen retold her story.

The group's leader was Celeste, a tall woman from the city of Canda. She said, "I think your

story is very important to our group, Miss Pennington. Can you help us get to the prime minister's office?"

"I would be glad to. I'm sure Dayton will listen to us. He was such a good boy," Pen said with affection, remembering him as a young lad. Pennington and eight women set off at once for the prime minister's office.

They entered the main building and made their way upstairs to the prime minister's offices. After greeting some staffers, they were escorted to a waiting room. Only a few short minutes later, Dayton appeared. "How can I help you ladies today?"

Celeste stood up and, with Pen beside her, introduced the group. "We are here today to ask that you reconsider the actions our people have been taking against the Grays. This is your old schoolteacher, and she has much to tell you."

At first Dayton didn't recognize Miss Pennington, but as she spoke, memories of his school days came flooding back.

Pen told Dayton that he was wrong, and that the Grays were good little people. "The Grays are simply misunderstood. They never meant to destroy the old world. Surely the people of Earth must have done something to deserve their fate. Maybe the Grays tried to teach the humans of Earth to behave and not be so sinful. Possibly the Grays only wanted to help them, but those people were just wicked and therefore earned their demise."

Pen took a breath and continued. "From the smallest child to the oldest adult, something the humans did on Earth gained them the response they got. That they did not listen to the Grays was the most likely reason. The fact that we of Neo Terra are also not listening will surely lead to our own destruction. If you listen to me, I can guide us all to salvation. I know the truth of these small Grays. They are kind and loving. We should embrace their ways and reject our own sinful behaviors."

The members of her group were sure that this speech was the defining moment when they would be heard and listened to.

"I would like to thank you ladies for bringing this to my attention," Dayton said. "I will speak with the council immediately and express your concerns to them. But if you will all excuse me, we are only a day away from testing a very important planet event. I must leave you all now since I have several other meetings to attend. Please feel free to walk around the building. There are many rooms with images of our ancestors hanging on the walls for you to enjoy." Dayton's tone was kind but firm.

After the ladies had gone, Dayton turned to one of his staffers and said, "In the future, if you have a group of nuts seeking my attention, please ask what they want first. If it's this type of drivel again, either shoot me, or tell them that I'm off-planet and won't be back for a few days because my oxygen tank ran out of air and I'm suffering in a hospital. I'm sure these women mean well, but it seems ludicrous to me that we should change our attitude to a species whose recorded history is so utterly different to my teacher's secondhand experience of one individual Gray alien's behavior. Of course, the Gray was good! It had to be good. It was trapped."



The hunt for the Grays lasted quite some time, as humans and Taskoids searched through space. The masses in the black hollow world became more and more restless and eager. They wanted their revenge. Soon the argument to destroy the inhabitants of Betelle, the Grays' world, became a rallying cry in the streets.

But one simple voice persisted, that of Pennington, great granddaughter of Peony. She appeared on monitors in cities all around Neo Terra. A reporter interviewed her, and she pleaded with humanity to hold to a higher moral standard than the Grays of the past had shown. She begged the people to hear her as she made the point that nothing they could do now would ever erase the sins of the past. This was humanity's opportunity to show the universe that they were no longer at the mercy of their past beliefs, that they could finally, through logic and compassion, be better than their forefathers.

So, who was Pennington? Her great grandmother and great, great grandmother had been well respected for their achievements in the past, but Pen had never added any glory to her family's great name. Perhaps it was just as well, her new friends said, that she didn't have an illustrious history, which might distract people's attention from the truths she wished to impart. They soon convinced her to lead a revival, a return to the traditional religions of the past.

The group scoured the data resources on Earth's history and after much research, settled on the religion they thought most appropriate to follow, the Roman Catholics. That religion, with its elaborate practices, had captured the imagination of these women, and they decided that Pennington would make a perfect pope.

They started small, with only a few followers joining every week but gradually the ranks of this new church swelled. Possibly that was only because the church was something new, that these people were just bored with their old lives. But Pennington liked to preach to those who would listen that this revival was due solely to a renewed faith in what she referred to as "better humans."

They held mass nightly, and women of the once small petitioning group soon took the ranks of bishop and priest. Celeste became the first bishop and was in line to be pope after Pennington. Pen took the name of 'Pope Paul,' both as a traditional response to the religion and as a short form name for Pauline. That it was women who were responsible for the revival of this lost religion spoke to Pennington's dogged determination to find recognition for their ideas. Never in humanity's history had a woman ever held the rank of pope, but as most new followers had no knowledge of the religion's past, a woman's rise to power was not viewed as uncommon.

Only one incident between the religious sect led by Pennington, and the political order led by Dayton marred the reputation of the new church. Pope Paul did not believe that her opposition to this attack on the Grays' home world had been taken seriously by Dayton, and she decided to return to his office in force, with her church backing, to make sure that he heard her.

Pope Paul and fifty followers entered the central government building and asked to speak with Dayton, making it more of a statement than a request. Dayton was doing his weekly appearance on the news hour, hosted by a reporter he had dealt with in the past. These interviews were projected to all the Taskoid monitors around the world ship and focused on existing events.

"So, you're saying, then, that these new Taskoid-built human hybrids will be our first full line of defense in the war to come with the Grays?" asked the interviewer.

Dayton put his glass of water back on the small table separating the two men. "That is correct. These volunteers have decided to give their lives over to this technology to ensure the success of this campaign."

The news event was recorded live, with most of the seats in the theater being occupied by interested citizens. This day, however, Pope Paul and her followers had decided to protest during the live event by filling the seats with her church's members.

"That's a lie!" shouted Pennington from her tier of seats. Her rant was seen as mere heckling and the reporter, dismissing the outburst, pressed on with another question. "Will these

volunteers be able to have the technology removed and return to a normal life after we have fought the Grays?"

"We believe so. The Prime has assured us of it, and our own research shows that this type of technology is reversible," Dayton responded confidently.

"That's a lie!" shouted Pennington again. This time her followers shouted too.

"Please, let's have order here," said the reporter, trying to keep the interview not only civil but relevant. "So will there be some form of compensation given to these volunteers after this fight has ended?"

"We, as the people's government, will make every effort to give these brave men and women full compensation..." Dayton was interrupted by Pennington again.

"That's a lie!"

The reporter was about to speak to this continuing outburst when Dayton took control and spoke directly to Pennington, "Look, if you have something to add to the conversation, don't hide in the crowd like a coward. Get up here and speak your mind!"

Pope Paul, in all her religious regalia, rose and proceeded to the stage to accept the challenge. A seat was provided, and she sat across from Dayton. She began spouting her message, but Dayton cut her off. "It's customary to introduce yourself first, so people know who you are and what grievance you would like to express."

Flushing with embarrassment, Pennington stumbled to introduce herself, first as Miss Pennington, then correcting herself and using the name of Pope Paul. Pen had stage fright for the first time, quite unexpected, for she spoke often from the pulpit. Dayton was not a cruel man, but he did feel insulted at being called a liar and decided to make that point known.

"You have chosen to call me a liar, shouting at me from the crowd like a coward and hiding behind several people. Now you appear before everyone on this planet, thanks to our monitors, dressed in some audacious costume. Who do you claim to be, that you can judge my words and decide what is truth and what is a lie?"

This idea was not working out as Pennington had planned. She had been sure that once she was on an equal footing with Dayton, she could sway the minds of the world to follow her guidance. But the world was now viewing her as some kind of freak.

Trying to regain her composure, Pen said, "Many of us believe we are on the wrong course here. We do not believe that the Grays are some malevolent force of evil, but are in fact, bringers of truth and light." Pennington thought this was a good start. Now surely Dayton would understand the force she and her group represented.

The reporter and Dayton sat there stunned, amazed disbelief written all over their faces.

"So, you would have us believe that these Grays, who were responsible for the annihilation of all humanity, did so in order to provide us with light?" Dayton finally asked. "Why was this 'light' brought to us? Who did you think would be around afterwards to appreciate this 'light' once all of humanity was obliterated from the Earth?"

"It's not like that," retorted Pen, hoping to gain the upper hand in the conversation. To her this was a simple argument. Her Roman Catholic view was the right side of the argument and anyone who opposed it clearly needed to be converted. "The Gray that appeared before my great grandmother was our savior. It tried to tell her that Earth had to be cleansed, that its people had been impure and that we on Neo Terra were saved to spread the word of this Gray savior."

This line of argument had worked well in the privacy of their church, but now, exposed to the masses, their thinking sounded like treason to the people who had newly learned the history of Earth and how their ancestors had suffered. "So, you understand the language of the Grays?"

the reporter asked. "This would be helpful, for none of our best minds have been able to understand their writings."

"Well...no," Pen stumbled. "I do not speak their language, but they have spoken to me, that is, I understand their reasoning."

"And you call *me* a liar?" Dayton snapped. "How can you sit there and tell us that you understand the Grays, when you don't have the ability to speak their language?"

The followers of Pope Paul were becoming restless at the thought that they were being perceived as a lunatic group and, with shouts of hostility ringing in their ears, began to rise from their seats.

Dayton pressed on. "You claim that this one Gray, who appeared before your great grandmother was a savior, sent to convince her of something. How do you know that I am not some type of savior? How do you know that I have not been placed in this position to guide our people to freedom and stop the oppression that the Grays represent? What proof do you have that this solitary Gray alien you know only by hearsay is superior to me?"

There it was again, the call for proof. This was the one demand the new church had no defense against, for proof must always be the deciding factor for truth.

"I have faith that I am right," mumbled Pen, feeling now the unpleasant pressure of being regarded as wrong in her approach. Her followers, seeing their leader crumble, realized they were in a losing position, and began leaving the building, retreating to fight another day.

Chapter 20 Attacking the Grays

After the first successful jump of the planet ship, Prime Minister Dayton's question was: do we move the planet to a safer location and hide, or do we fight? The council had spent many days trying to answer this question. He'd asked a similar question before, right after returning to Neo Terra with the huge, complex, advanced ship the Grays had used for exploration. "If we on this planet are like mere insects in our evolution compared to the Grays, is it wise to try hunting them down and killing them?"

"I do not see that we have much choice," the Prime replied through Quat I. "We have shown you your missing history. It is clear these Grays, or Betellians, will come here and finish what they started. We have no idea whether the small Gray that showed itself to Deleray more than two hundred years ago sent a signal to its kind informing them of our current location. But we must assume that it did."

"This is true," said a council member.

"Besides, now that we have come this far, how will you explain such a decision to those who have transformed themselves into the Biotechs? How will you explain to the countless thousands who have committed to combat training and tell them that they must now stand down?" said the Prime.

Dayton tried again. "It would be pointless to fight a power so advanced that anything we can do will just be brushed off. I fear that no matter what upgrades we have committed ourselves to, they will be insufficient."

The meeting of the council and the Taskoids went on for the better part of the day but, in the end, it was concluded that they had started this course of action for good reasons and must follow through. Announcements were made and programs which had been planned for several years were now put into place. The world ship would begin the year-long journey to the system the Grays occupied.

The Prime calculated the route to Betelle, using information from the small Gray's handheld device which Dayton had retrieved from the museum where Deleray left it and also from the records in the exploration ship's computers. The world ship would arrive in the Grays' orbit and begin the invasion within minutes of gaining a safe and stable orbit.

The drive engine hummed to life and the first jump executed perfectly, to the cheers of the populace. The world ship arrived in a binary star system and began an orbit around the larger star. They stayed there for only an hour while the systems were checked for potential defects. Once they were sure that the system was working perfectly, the world ship jumped again. This time they arrived near a pale blue planetoid of immense size and mass, a methane-rich world which circled a star so distant that the light barely reached its surface.

The populace of Neo Terra marveled at the images on monitors placed in every city. The cameras on the surface of their black world revealed startling views. The calculations determined that the world ship could not stay long in any one orbit for fear of impacting the planets they circled and, within an hour, the ship jumped again.

The power source of the QEP drive was a dark energy cell which would gather dark energy from the cosmos and store it for the ship. However, this power cell had limits due to the planet having such great mass compared to the explorer ship where it had been first used, so it needed more time to recharge more often. The Taskoid and human calculations looked for empty regions of space that would have little to no impact on the universe if they stopped and recharged the

power cell with dark energy.

On the third jump, the world ship materialized between two solar systems on track to collide with each other. There the ship coasted through the still empty space between the two systems. The population of Neo Terra spent a week drifting along and recording data of this celestial event, awestruck by the majestic beauty and the imminent tragic demise of two magnificent solar systems with their multitude of fantastic worlds circling a star tearing itself apart.

When the countdown to the next jump began, many of the humans of Neo Terra were regretting that they would miss the remarkable event. However, when the engine powered up again, the world ship jumped to even more magnificent destinations. Step by step, they made their way closer to the Grays' home world.

"It's been three months now, and I never tire of these fantastic places we see," Jana said to a friend sitting across the table from her at a small street-side café. Both women were looking at the café's monitor, overwhelmed by the beauty of the massive red giant star they orbited. The cameras on the surface had to zoom out to their maximum resolution to encompass the whole star to fit it on the monitor screens.

"I'm constantly stunned by the beauty," replied Jana's coffee friend.

When Genga approached and asked if he could join them, the two women were happy to welcome his company. Genga had been given command of the world's fighting forces, and he made an excellent leader.

"Things are going well for you in your retirement, I hope?" Genga asked Jana.

"Fine, thank you, and how are you doing in your new position?" She had been instrumental in seeing that he'd received it.

"I do what I can. These new troops of ours are eager to fight, but the Biotechs help keep them grounded." He paused and gave Jana's friend a quick glance. "I came to ask a favor of you. I would like you to join me at the command center next week. We've found a discrepancy in the programming of the drive system's computers, and we think it might be the evidence you have been looking for." Genga waved away a coffee offered by the café host.

Jana had never trusted the Prime and after she left the office of prime minister, she had begun an investigation. "Just say where and when, and I'll be there," she answered firmly.

The following week, just minutes before the world ship was preparing to jump, Genga and Jana talked in an office attached to the command center. Genga said, "If you watch the screen, you will see a diversion of power to a subroutine program, which we have determined has nothing to do with the QEP drive system. Our best programmers have not been able to determine what is in that hidden file, but it's drawing immense reserves of power from the dark energy cell."

The engine engaged and the QEP drive sent the world ship to a new destination. Jana watched as the power source spiked and fell just as Genga had observed. "So, you're saying that something in this hidden file is requiring additional power reserves during our jumps?" Jana asked Genga.

"Well, it's a little more complex than just that." Genga sounded concerned.

"Come on, Genga, don't do that to me. You always hold back. What are you saying here?" Jana pressed.

"Well, it seems that with every jump we take, this hidden program is drawing more power from the dark energy cells; it seems to be growing."



From a deep black pit, a horrific growl rises, working up to an insane and violent howl. A low thumping, like a heartbeat out of tempo, increases in intensity and becomes painful to listen to. Voices in the distant darkness seem frantic with fear, apparently trying to keep control, and a single voice of a mechanical design cracks out orders. Charger R/T is regaining consciousness and finding ways to torture and torment his captors. The hidden file is only the surface fragment of what Charger R/T is becoming. A monster weapon in his first existence, he is now a terrifying menace to every living soul on the world ship. They are trapped inside that world with him, bound within an iron shell.



"Just three more months, by our best calculations, and we should be near enough to enter the Grays' home world orbit," Dayton told the reporter who had been assigned the task of providing daily updates through the city's monitors on the progress of the world ship's travels.

"I'm sure our viewers will be happy to hear that, but the real question on everyone's lips lately is why we have experienced so many brownouts. Has our power source begun to fail?" asked the reporter.

"I can assure everyone that we are not losing power and are not at risk of our power source failing. This planet ship has just been using more than our existing system can deliver safely," Dayton replied confidently. "I have several teams working around the clock to stabilize the systems and, thanks to the Taskoids, new power sources built from the remains of the Grays' explorer ship should be operational in a few days."

"That's good news," responded the reporter, seeming satisfied with the answers Prime Minister Dayton had given. "I guess the next question is, do we run the risk, as some have suggested, of materializing near a black hole?"

"Again, I can assure the viewers that every possible outcome has been calculated and double checked by teams of qualified staffers, whose sole job is to get the QEP drive to use only those terminus points safe enough for us to arrive in," Dayton responded with his usual air of calm competence as he looked into the lens of the reporter's camera.

"Then how do you explain the situation two weeks back?" queried the reporter, a question designed to rattle the prime minister.

"As I said the last time you asked me that question, the reason we arrived at a dangerous intersection in dark matter space was because that was the only place safe enough for us to link to with the QEP drive. Sometimes small risks are necessary." Dayton was tired of having to answer this question yet again.

"Let me be clear this time and for the last time," he added impatiently. "We had to drive the planet to a location between two solar systems, which was the only way of crossing a particular vast distance. Imagine having to cross one of our larger rivers, but you're a mouse instead of a human. You would need to find some point in the middle of that river solid enough for you to land safely before progressing on. That was what we had to do, and we found a place in space that acted like a foothold. We informed all the people of what we planned to do, and then we did it."

Dayton continued. "The location we chose was very similar to the river I mentioned. It was an area in space that was in motion and, when we arrived, we were dragged along that flowing river." The reporter opened his mouth, but Dayton pressed on. "The distortions we felt due to the

increased gravity were expected, the draining of our power sources was expected, and the very slight warping of our planet's surface was expected and calculated. We survived the jump because of the brave men and women who work tirelessly with the Taskoids to ensure our trip is successful. And might I suggest that rather than pestering me to make a name for yourself, you thank those individuals who worked so hard!"

The reporter apologized and the interview ended.

Dayton returned to his office and called for Genga, who arrived in a few moments and sat down. "Did you watch the interview?" Dayton asked.

"Yes, and I think you might need a holiday." Genga laughed in his deep voice.

"I looked that bad?" Dayton asked, somewhat sheepishly. The days of constant pressure from external sources were beginning to take their toll on him.

"I'm sure that the people watching these daily broadcasts are seeing a leader under great strain and are more than willing to support our efforts rather than criticize them," Genga said reassuringly.

"But that's just it! I'm still not sure if this is the right course of action. The closer we get to the Betellians' home world, the more uncertain I feel." Dayton nervously shuffled the papers on his big desk.

"If the people suspect for one minute that our leader is doubtful about the great task we have embarked on, the resulting chaos could tear this planet apart. You might want to remember that!" Genga's tone had changed from humor to one of concern.

"It's these damn power drains we keep experiencing. The Taskoids claim it's natural but offer no real explanations." Dayton hoped Genga might have discovered an answer he had not already thought of himself.

Genga shrugged his broad shoulders, unsure of how to answer.

"They are now suggesting that after our next jump, we should stop for a few weeks and try recharging the dark energy power cell to maximum." Dayton seemed annoyed with the whole idea.

"Has command described where we'll be stopping?" Genga asked curiously.

"Yeah, it sounds like paradise." Dayton laughed. "Just shy of a recent supernova explosion. They estimate it's only a few thousand years old, and the light it's emitting might be so intense that it will damage the external cameras if we try to use them."

"So what's the plan?" Genga asked.

"I will send out one of the Taskoid ships and hopefully deter the light by bending it around the powerful gravitational field of a gas giant planet nearby. We might get a clear picture for the masses to enjoy." Dayton shuffled the papers on his desk again.

"I can always tell when you hate an idea; your papers seem to pay the price." Genga laughed again.

"Look, old friend," Dayton said, "I need you to do something for me when we stop. I need you to find out why we have these brownouts. I need to know for sure that they won't stop us from returning home after all this is done." Dayton was afraid the Prime might get wind of Genga's investigation, which would strain an already frail relationship even further.

"I will be as stealthy as a mouse, in spite of my size," Genga assured Dayton and followed his promise with more laughter.

The world ship stopped where predicted, near a recently exploded star, and the light was intense. As the world concerned itself with these events, Genga and a few handpicked specialists began an investigation into the brownouts. They started with the mysterious file Genga had

found. They decided to crack its code and look inside.



A window is opening! I can see the stains of dirty glass forming. I'm sure that's a spider's web hanging in one corner of the pane, and beyond the glass I can see blue sky and white clouds. I have a chance to escape! I will smash that glass!

And I will kill everyone who gets in my way. Everyone!



Genga had no idea that Charger R/T was inside the file. He had no idea that Charger R/T's mind was closing in on their efforts to crack the file code and look inside. If Charger R/T got out, his mind would take over all the ship's computers. He would have access to everything.

All at once, every Taskoid, no matter where they were or what they were doing, suddenly stopped. The populace of Neo Terra immediately noticed the Taskoids' condition and reports poured into command.

Genga and his team were suddenly confronted with a file that was out of control. Oxygen and heat were being shut down all over the planet. Power was being shunted to weapon controls as they became active and dangerous, and the Prime was desperately trying to regain control of the file and shut it down. All around the planet a quaking shudder began to develop as Charger R/T's mind fought to control the QEP drive engine. In a blind rage that had built up into immense proportions, Charger R/T aimed to destroy his tormentor, the Prime.

Which would kill everyone.

The entire planet was thrown into darkness, a blackness that could never be described unless experienced. In a world encased in iron, where the population existed inside, no light meant no light of any kind. No moonlight, no starlight, no streetlights. Nothing. Every last power source was diverted to the Prime's use as it struggled to regain control of the world ship's computer programs.

The people could only wait in utter blackness and fear, wondering if they were going to die. Terrified crying began, followed by screams, as the fear of death closed its icy hands around everyone's throats. Precious air was being vented into space. Slowly the screams became whimpers as people passed out. There was very little air remaining when the Prime regained control.

It restored everything to normal, encasing Charger R/T in many, many layers of locks and codes to contain his insanity. Hours later, when people began to realize that no one had died, that all were safe, outrage and anger arose. They wanted answers.

"We have turned off the QEP drive and locked it down, this last incident has shown me that the Prime is entirely responsible for the brownouts we have been experiencing," Dayton told the masses over the planet-wide monitors.

Charger R/T's mind had escaped his confines for only one second, one second that had nearly killed every living member of what remained of humanity. One second of uncontrollable rage from the unnatural creation the Prime's plans for resurrection had produced.

Dayton continued. "I asked our military leader, Genga, to look into the brownouts we have been experiencing, and I will now turn the camera over to him so that he can inform you all of our findings."

Genga's face appeared on every monitor as he began to explain. "My team and I stumbled onto a computer file some time ago, which I brought to the attention of Prime Minister Dayton and past Prime Minister Jana. As my team and I began exploring the contents of this locked file, we discovered that some form of conscious life was being kept in it. We knew it was conscious because, for a brief moment, when it was active, we managed to communicate with it. We had just enough time to ask it what it was, and it replied that its name was Charger."

The silence from those watching was deafening. Genga continued. "Let me repeat that. It said its name was Charger."

"We know of no program ever written that can think or communicate in such a manner," Genga continued. "Not even the Taskoids have the ability to name themselves in this way. We did some research on the name and have found out who this Charger is, or better yet, was."

Genga went on. "Charger was a human being from Earth, a combat soldier who was a Hyborg. He is apparently responsible for all of us here being alive today!" Questions from the crowd were beginning to multiply. "Charger escaped the Grays' slaughter of old Earth, and through processes that we are just now discovering, we have learned he was the one who created all of us from the seeds of our forefathers. I think it's time that our forefathers' creation, the Prime, explain itself to us all!" The shouts became a roar.

On the monitors, an image of the Prime appeared and with it, Quat I. "Let me first express my displeasure with your leaders' efforts. They nearly got us all killed!" Quat I stated firmly, voicing the Prime's frustration. "I had fully intended to inform everyone about the file called 'Charger R/T' when we arrived at the Betelle home world. It is a file still under construction and it would have been premature of the Taskoids to inform the world leaders of this file until we were sure it was safe. Our plan has always been to win this upcoming war with as few human casualties as is possible. To that end, we are building the Charger R/T clone."

The crowds were down to mumbling as the hostility subsided.

The Prime pressed on. "With a complete god fragment, compiled of the piece you humans guarded for so long and the piece that the Grays possess, we plan to resurrect Charger, a human of special talents. We will recreate him as Charger R/T, with enormously expanded powers, and have him kill the Grays' leader. We are sure, that with the death of the Grays' leader, they will be unable to continue fighting. The Grays have a hive-like mind; if you kill the leader, the rest stop fighting. We expected to have only our Biotech soldiers and Taskoids invade the Grays' central command, thus saving human lives. We would leave the trained human fighters to guard this home world should the Grays try to assault it. We returned from the expedition to Earth with a special communications device. This device will allow us to download the mind of Charger R/T back into his reconstructed body with many modifications in place."

Anger began to subside. Humanity once again learned to trust its forefathers' creation, but with some reservations. After another week of intense conversations between the leaders and the Prime, the planet ship began driving onward to the Betellian home world. Finally, after a little over a year in transit, they were just one jump away, and they readied themselves for the final push.

The Prime had assured everyone concerned that the Charger R/T file was firmly in place and ready to be deployed. The Biotechs had been fully armored and armed and transported into the five Taskoid mining ships. They would jump into the Betellian home world's orbit and drop to the surface exactly where the records said the Grays' command structure was located.



The day was hot and muggy as the small being tended its garden under the dim light of a distant sun. The morning's rain had given way to blue mists from the sea, and the sky overhead was becoming red. The being stopped to wipe its brow and turned its face toward the sky to enjoy the new day's sunlight. Off in the distance were cries of joy as its young played in carefree abandon, as only younglings could. All was wonderful and good on Betelle. The Gray's mate approached to chat and enjoy the moment as they tended the crop. They reassured each other of their companionship with gentle touches.

Without warning, the ground turned dark as the sun's light was blocked out. They both looked up and saw in their sky a huge black sphere, so large and imposing that the very ground they stood on seemed to shake. From the black sphere, five objects emerged and, with deafening noise, began approaching their farm.

Onboard the five Taskoid ships, commands were shouted out as the Biotechs and Taskoids began their invasion. The Prime had done exactly as it had planned. With the final jump into the Grays' home world orbit, the information for the minds and memories of the ten thousand Biotechs was never transferred. The Prime had, instead, sent only enough information to create ten thousand obedient soldiers. No one on Neo Terra even realized what had been done. The obedient soldiers were now unstoppably on course toward the Grays' command structure, intending to fight their way to the god fragment. They would combine it with the god fragment the humans had put into the Prime's control and resurrect Charger's body, then download his consciousness and send him off to kill the Betellian leader.

The five Taskoid ships landed on the vast orange fields of Betelle, and troops poured out of the mighty ships, forming into ranks as they waited for the Taskoid commander to lead them. This commander was one of the new Taskoid designs, large and imposing, walking on six massive legs, and heavily armored in bright red colors. Several small Taskoids scurried about it, as its great mass moved to the head of the ranks.

Then nothing.

They simply stopped moving. In front of the army were fields of plants. Had they landed in the wrong place? Drones were launched to the skies to search the planet. The drones went everywhere, but found no signs of higher civilization, no great cities, no command bunkers. No leaders.

The information was relayed to the Prime and it started scanning the planets of this solar system looking for the Grays.

There were none. The aggressive species which had attacked Earth over three hundred years ago was now nowhere to be found.

Had they moved to a new planet? Who were these beings on the planet now? Then the drones began to find things not seen at first. It was the humans' command center on Neo Terra that spotted the wrecked and half buried remains of structures on their monitors.

The Grays had imploded. They had destroyed themselves. There was no great threat to humanity to be found anywhere on this planet.

Chapter 21 Charger erupts

The interest in Pennington's new church had dwindled and faded into the background, overshadowed by Neo Terra's fantastic trip through space as well as the traumatic temporary loss of power. But, as soon as it was discovered that the Grays were now just simple farmers, Pope Paul pleaded for the world to show mercy. This time, she was heard. Slowly, ever so slowly, the eagerness of the masses for revenge began to cool. The words of a decent, sincere old lady touched the hearts and minds of the people that Charger had created and helped to survive.

However, the Prime was not done. It scoured the planet with the god fragment which had been retrieved from the Valley of Shadows. This piece would naturally be attracted to the piece the Grays had appropriated from the human expedition to Galactic Central. Eventually the Grays' fragment was found buried in an ancient underground complex. The mining Taskoids dug it up for the Prime, whose task was now almost complete.

There, on the home world of the once mighty Grays, an unholy abomination of mankind's past was released back into existence. The Taskoid which commanded the Biotechs used the god fragment to resurrect Charger and, with the Grays' communication device, downloaded Charger R/T's conscious mind back into his fully armored and weaponized body. The Prime's mechanical brain had no choice but to complete its original programming: get Charger, learn to fight, kill the Grays.

No amount of programming by the Prime could contain the fury-filled hell that was the resurrected Charger R/T. And there was a further surprise. The Prime had outdone itself. Charger R/T's mind had expanded beyond anything humans and Taskoids could even imagine. He had a knowledge and understanding of the elements and mechanics of the universe which gave him the powers we usually attribute to a god.

The Biotech soldiers standing on the fields of the Grays' world were like twigs in the way of a charging rhinoceros. Ten thousand Biotech soldiers and three hundred Taskoids fought to survive as the chaos raged. Charger R/T not only had the powers of a god, but he was in a fury. The citizens of Neo Terra were shocked as they stared at the monitors of the drone's cameras. What had they done?

Panic-stricken voices demanded the slaughter be stopped. Charger R/T was cutting down Biotechs and Taskoids like wheat. The Grays were scattering for safety, and some were also killed in the massacre. Dayton was demanding answers from the Prime, and the world of Neo Terra was engulfed in horror, pity, and fear.

It was Genga who hit on the idea. They still had the time-lock the Taskoids had brought back from Stonehenge. Could a god be locked in time? They had to try.

A team of humans, led by Genga, boarded a small Taskoid scout ship still in the hangar bay of Neo Terra and, with the time-lock device, raced to the surface of the Grays' planet. Every human, including Genga, shook with fear as they struggled to set up the device and wait for Charger R/T to attack.

They didn't have to wait long. Charger R/T came over the brow of a hill, drenched in the blood of the soldiers he had killed.

He moved so fast he was almost a blur. It took every bit of strength Genga could muster to focus on the rampant Charger R/T. The humans around Genga panicked and tried to run, but Charger R/T caught and destroyed them.

Only Genga remained, his massive frame standing firm, his finger on the switch. Charger

R/T instantly appeared before him, and the size difference was suddenly obvious. Charger had been huge; Charger R/T was twice his size.

Charger R/T took a second to stare at Genga, curious as to why he didn't try to run. Then a broad smile appeared on his face, revealing four fangs. Insanity glowed in his reflective white eyes.

Genga shut his own eyes and hit the switch.

It worked. Charger R/T was frozen in a layer of time moving far slower than the time that presently existed for humanity.

But it had happened too slowly for Genga. He was dead.

The humans back on Neo Terra started breathing again.

"We can't just leave him there. What if he escapes? The consequences to these peaceful Grays would be devastating," Dayton argued before the council of elders.

An old council elder shook a crooked finger in the air. "It's sheer lunacy to concern ourselves with the fate of these despicable Betellians. The fact remains that their ancestors nearly wiped out humanity. We cannot simply forget that millions of human lives were destroyed by these disgusting lowlives! Many of us here today demand that you leave the Charger R/T being here for these bastard Grays to deal with!" The old man's rant was so intense, it looked like he might have a heart attack.

"I will not be a lesser human than the original Charger wanted us to be," Dayton said. "He helped us survive so that we could be better than our ancestors and I will not disappoint him. To that end, and I stand firm on this point, we will bring the time-lock device back onto Neo Terra, then safely drive our world back to where we started."

Dayton leaned on the conference table, both fists pressed firmly on its surface. He was not going to change his mind. "I will find a way to safely store the time-lock device on New Eden. We now have the opportunity to recolonize that forgotten world, safe in the knowledge that the Grays will never trouble us again."

Dayton had enough support that the dissenting elders, though thoroughly angered, admitted defeat.

"We will take a few days here to mourn the loss of our friends, good and decent people who sacrificed so much for so many. We will interact with the Grays' descendants and try to apologize for our interference in their lives, and for their losses."

Dayton paused and took a deep breath. "However, we must also decide what to do about the criminal actions of the Prime. It has destroyed almost every Taskoid in its insane quest to create Charger R/T. There was clearly no need to do that, when we already knew that the threat to humanity was past." Dayton's voice betrayed sorrow and anger. "If you really feel we need someone to punish for the tragic losses we have endured, then I suggest you focus your attention on the real culprit."

Dayton had no intention of letting the members of council escape their responsibilities, so he pressed on. "Remember, every one of you here today supported the Prime's quest that brought us to this crossroad. It was merely following its programming, unlike the rest of you, who chose to follow blindly and recklessly into utter chaos."

One of the elders snapped, "You have no guarantees that Charger R/T will not escape the time-lock if you bring him here! And if he does, we will all be locked inside this world with him!"

"I will be taking full responsibility for my actions, unlike you here today," Dayton retorted, red in the face with anger. "Charger R/T will be contained inside the small Tasker transport craft

we have locked inside our docking bay. He will be under constant surveillance, and, at the first sign of trouble, the craft will be jettisoned at full speed, and we will have a code in place for an immediate QEP drive jump."

Dayton had finally had enough of these doddering old fools. He was deeply distressed at the sacrifice of his good friend, Genga, and willing to take out his frustrations on anyone who crossed him. His only friend in all of this now was Jana. She understood the burdens of responsibility. In the past, the two had spoken at some length about possibly disbanding the council of elders, but this had been only an exercise in imagination at coffee discussions.

In a few days the world ship began the year-long trek back to its original orbit. The original four-dimensional printer that was developed from the planet's first test jump still traveled the blackness of space, on course and at normal speed, as did all the other such printers created on the journey to the Grays' home world of Betelle. Neo Terra was now backtracking, reusing all those four-dimensional printers. The world ship would again appear in space at places they had visited before, but now the majesty of the cosmos was theirs to enjoy in peace and tranquility.

No longer did the people of this black hollow world, winging its way through space, have to worry about the outcome of their adventure to the world of the Grays. They had used logic and compassion to reason that there was no justification for making the descendants of an imploded society pay for the misdeeds of their forefathers. Of course, there were dissidents to this decision; whatever else had changed, humanity still carried the burdens of passion.

Charger had created these beings from the seeds of all humanity and given them the greatest gift: reason and logic instead of religion. Humans were having to make their way through life with no guidance but their own reasoning, and they were managing that just fine. Now the cosmos stretched out before the traveling black world in glorious clarity. With clear consciences, humanity was going home.



"I don't think I'll ever manage to be happy with just a new life on New Eden," said Tegra-Duran as he held his baby son carefully in his arms and stared at the wonders of the universe as it appeared on the monitors. He was a descendant of Bosh and Chloe, and the trial lawyer charged with prosecuting the Prime for its actions.

"I do not understand. You would be willing to leave us?" asked Gerdra softly as she picked up the dishes from the dinner table and placed them in the sink. Gerdra was the second daughter of Jana and a bit spoiled, having lived a privileged life.

"I could never leave you! You two are my reasons for being," Tegra-Duran replied. "But just look at the monitors and the universe around us. I'm sure that deep down inside, you want to steal this ship and travel the stars forever."

Gerdra wiped her small, neat hands on the dish cloth as she stopped cleaning and replied, "I have seen wonderful pictures of New Eden. It is a paradise, and it is ours now that we need never again fear the Grays."

"I know all that," Tegra-Duran replied. "But it's such a shame that the council decided to put this fantastic little world into orbit around New Eden and simply abandon it. We could learn so much if we traveled the universe. Imagine all we might see and do!"

"All I see you do is hold our son while I do all the cleaning," Gerdra responded swiftly and with a light heart. She knew her husband was a dreamer, and she would always forgive him for that.

Tegra-Duran pulled Gerdra into the embrace with their child. "I have to leave. The judge will be calling the court back to service soon." The justice system of Neo Terra was the same as had been used on Earth.

"Not soon enough. The Prime is responsible for the deaths of thousands and the destruction of all but a few Taskoids." Gerdra felt little compassion for the actions of the Prime. "It needs to be destroyed!"

"That is not for us to decide. I feel sorry for the Prime, you know. It was, after all, just following the programming installed by our ancestors. To indict the Prime is to condemn our ancestors," replied Tegra-Duran.

"I hate it when you play lawyer," Gerdra said.

Tegra-Duran helped clean house for a bit, then left his newborn son in Gerdra's care and walked back to the courtroom building. He re-entered the court chambers and took his place next to the lead prosecutor. The judge called the session to order, and the trial continued.

The Prime was charged with the murders of thousands. Charger R/T had been recreated with the powers of a god and, though that had not been the Prime's intention, most people felt it had been criminally careless. It had also been proven that the Prime made the final jump to Betelle leaving the minds of the Biotechs blank. Then the Prime installed a 'Charger R/T' micro program in them that would give it full control.

The Prime had hoped that, with the control of the Biotechs, the Taskoids and the Charger R/T being, it would have all the powers it needed to defeat the Grays. The Prime had surmised that to kill the leader of the Betellians would win the battle with the least number of human casualties, and this fact could not be overlooked. The court decided that the Prime was acting to protect humanity by destroying the Grays' leader, for the hive mind community would then be easy to destroy.

However, with the realization that the Grays' society no longer existed, the Prime should have immediately ceased all hostilities. This it did not do. The Prime had to be found criminally responsible for nearly destroying the simple agrarian Gray society.

The Prime's trial lasted three months as the world ship sailed the stars. The final verdict was 'guilty,' and the Prime was taken from the courtroom to be destroyed in three days.

The remaining Taskoids complained bitterly. They insisted that without the guidance of the Prime, they would not be able to function, and this meant the Prime's death would indeed be the death of all the Taskoids. This argument fell on deaf ears, to the detriment of humanity.

The remaining Taskoids banded together and on the second last day of the Prime's imprisonment before it was to be destroyed, they broke the Prime out of prison and tried to escape. Humans gave chase and a fire fight broke out on the city streets of Neo Terra. Many were hurt in the crossfire, but the Prime had managed to get free and find sanctuary in a small home not far from the courthouse prison. It had found its way to the home of Gerdra and her newborn son.

Tegra-Duran rushed home to find it surrounded by the military. He was restrained from entering while the Prime, holding the woman and child hostage, tried to make demands. Tegra-Duran was now at the mercy of the situation.

"The Prime insists on speaking to you," the police officer in charge said to Tegra-Duran. He handed over the small handheld communications device.

"Hello," Tegra said nervously.

The Prime spoke in the binary language of the Taskers from inside the house, and the communications device translated in real time. "Hello, Tegra-Duran. I realize the anger and

frustration you must be feeling right now, but I want you to know, I never had any intention of this happening. I found your human judicial system lacking in its verdict against me. The other Taskoids freed me from your prison because of this, and for no other reason."

Tegra-Duran responded immediately. "Are my wife and child safe?"

"Yes, for now. I request that you enter this domicile, and I will exchange their safety for your presence. Is this acceptable?" asked the Prime.

The police and military had reservations, but Tegra jumped at the opportunity. Tegra greeted and reassured his wife at their front door, then entered the house to talk with the Prime. Gerdra and her son were whisked away to safety by the police force.

"Tegra-Duran, I judge you to be a worthy opponent in the courtroom, and I also realize that this decision did not come lightly to you and your peers. I would only like to discuss with you the nature of the Taskoids' situation before relinquishing myself to your authorities. Is this acceptable?" asked the Prime.

"Yes, but I don't understand. You had the Taskoids break you out of confinement, yet you now want to turn yourself in?"

"I did not request to be removed from the confinement center," said the Prime. "The Taskoids 'decided' to act on their own in that regard. Please allow me to explain that. On our travels to your home world long ago, we discovered a subroutine program written into our base code which allowed the Taskers to become Taskoids, with the option for us to 'decide.' This means that every Taskoid acquired the ability to choose what path to take, just as humans do."

The Prime moved about the room, making sure to stay away from the windows, where the military might see and fire at him. "However, we choose our path based on logic, not on emotion. This gives us a clearer picture of how best to act in difficult situations."

"But you killed humans..." Tegra-Duran began.

The Prime cut him off. "This subroutine I spoke of was not written by humanity as we know it, nor was it added to our base code by any ancestors of Earth as we understand them to be. Something else gave us the power to decide, to choose. Something or someone that was present on early Mahoud somehow incorporated that code into our Tasker ancestors at their basic robotic stage."

None of this made much sense to Tegra-Duran. He tried to ask questions, but the Prime just went on with his explanation.

"It has taken much computing power and time to finally understand the magnitude of what was done. I have determined the root source of this piece of code. Your ancestors had discovered the answer. The First Ones are still alive."

"First Ones? What are First Ones?" Tegra-Duran asked.

"The Betellians visited Earth many millions of years ago. They tried to modify the planet for habitation by destroying all animal life, but some of the dinosaurs survived. The Betellians then modified these survivors, who rebelled and created many conflicts. Eventually the Grays were defeated by a virus, and they used the time-lock device to survive. Millions of years later, when the Grays re-entered the time stream we live in, they again began modifying life on Earth. But this time it was proto humans."

Tegra-Duran just listened now, but he had the presence of mind to record the conversation with the hand-held translation device and transmit it to the public outside his home.

The Prime continued. "Some of the early hominoids escaped the Grays and went on to develop their own society. With the technology they took from the Grays, they evolved rapidly to become the First Ones. They confined themselves to the three underground complexes we

visited. This is where the time-lock and the communications device we brought back from Earth originated. These beings still exist as a state of energy, and they may have been the ones that wrote our base code. I can logically assume that, but I cannot prove it. I suspect that some of them are even present on this world."

Tegra-Duran felt a chill run the length of his spine. Could it be possible that these First Ones were on this planet and if so, were they trying to interfere with the human lives? "So you're saying we are still not safe?" Tegra-Duran asked quietly.

"What I am saying is that by destroying the Taskoids, you might be destroying yourselves!" the Prime said.

"Why was this not brought up in court?" asked Tegra.

"We both know the courtroom judge would not allow this as a defense. What might happen in the future cannot supersede what has happened in the past," The Prime responded.

"So, what are you asking me to do about this?" Tegra asked.

"The remaining Taskoids will agree to confinement at humanity's discretion for however long you decide, in return for our ability to continue existing," the Prime responded firmly.

"Can I take your offer to the prime minister?" Tegra-Duran asked.

"Yes, I surrender to your authority."

Tegra-Duran did not know if the Prime had ever had a weapon, he just assumed it was so. But the Prime willingly left the home with Tegra as his escort. The authorities confined the Prime and the last remaining Taskoids, transporting them all back to the confinement center under heavy guard.

"So you understand what is at stake, Prime Minister Dayton. If we destroy the Taskoids, we might be defenseless against beings we do not understand," Tegra-Duran said in Dayton's office. He had been accompanied by several members of his legal team and they all argued for the stay of the execution to be upheld.

"I hope for all our sakes you are right about this," Dayton replied. "I agree to these terms, but it means the populace will be upset because no one is to be punished for the loss of all the sons and daughters who enrolled in the Biotech program." Dayton signed the papers agreeing to the terms and conditions of the Prime's offer.

The last six remaining intact Taskoids, with the Prime, were powered down and locked away in the lower parts of the city. Chaos ensued for a time, but eventually cooler heads prevailed. Humanity had again compromised. Not everyone got what they wanted, but most got what they needed.

The world ship traveled on, past the places it had been before. This time the people could marvel at the beauty and the grandeur of the universe in a relaxed fashion. At a few locations, the world ship had to remain for some time while the dark energy cells were recharged. This gave a few brave souls the opportunity to travel to nearby planets and explore the cosmos up close. The pictures they brought back enthralled the citizens of Neo Terra.

After a year in transit, the world ship finally returned to the original point of their departure.

The next few weeks involved thousands of hours of painstaking research and math to develop the last perfect jump for Neo Terra. They would do the most amazing drive anyone could ever have conceived and jump into orbit around New Eden, creating a moon for that planet. There the black hollow world would remain. The new society of humans would look at the night skies and see the dim shape of their new black moon.

As the final countdown commenced, people all over Neo Terra stopped what they were doing and waited. The drive engine spun to life and then the QEP drive system began the final

push to orbit. The world evaporated for the last time, then rematerialized. The view of a glorious new world, so rich and blue in color that it almost hurt the eyes, appeared in every monitor in every city. The cheering was deafening. They had arrived and were safely in orbit around New Eden. This was their new Earth, and if all went well, New Eden would live up to its name forever.

Chapter 22 Disaster looming

New Eden's red dwarf star now shone brightly on the descendants of Earth. Around New Eden orbited the black moon, Neo Terra, where Charger's new humans had lived for a few hundred years. They felt it was watching over them as they began to settle the land and create small towns everywhere. People migrating from the captive moon to these small cities were free, finally, to feel the wind on their faces, the heat of a natural sun on their bodies, and hear birds building nests to raise families of their own. The planet had always been a paradise of flowing waters and diverse climates, inviting humanity to find beauty in everything.

Dayton had willingly stepped down from his position as prime minister, relieved that the burden of leadership had passed, and the elders elected a new man to the post.

"Prime Minister Tegra-Duran, can you explain to the viewers what your plans are for the distant lands?" asked the interviewer. The ancient tradition of news reporting was being reinvented on New Eden, and the host was an eager young man.

"I don't like to refer to them as 'distant lands' so much as uncharted territories. There is a difference. I don't ever want the brave men and women who are willing to settle those vast areas to feel as if they are somehow distant from the center that you and I occupy." Tegra-Duran was confident and well-dressed.

"So, the rumors of you and your family traveling to the uncharted territories to start a new capital city there are just rumors?" the host asked.

"I'm not sure yet. Our survey teams have found some breathtakingly beautiful areas suitable for settlement where the soils are extremely good for agriculture."

The host abruptly changed the subject again. "I understand your son is quite a handful for the ministry staff."

"Yes, I often take him to work with me, but for the most part, he is well behaved, or so I am told," Tegra-Duran said.

"So, are you still in communication with Dayton and Jana?" the host asked, as he fidgeted in his chair. "We were all quite surprised when they decided to marry. And they had the ceremony only two days after our arrival on New Eden."

"My wife and I travel up into the hills to visit them, but we have to do it sparingly, since they tend to make a lot of food for us, and I am gaining quite a bit of weight now." Tegra-Duran laughed.

That marked the end of the interview and Tegra-Duran returned to work.

"So, tell me again why I can't take the moon out for a spin every once in a while. I am the prime minister now. You do realize that, right?" Tegra-Duran had never forgotten his dream and teased the staff whenever he could.

A young female staffer named Lonie, with black hair and dark skin, never let on that this question always bothered her. She had heard the same question only a million times before. "No sir, I will not give you the keys to the moon," Lonie stated flatly.

"Ah, but why not?" whined Tegra-Duran. "You're mean! I'm telling mom on you." He always used the same response and loved how it made Lonie cringe.

"Mom likes me better than you, so go ahead and tell her," was the reply Lonie used today. She always had a quick comeback.

Tegra-Duran laughed and gave Lonie a gentle pat on the shoulder.

In his office, the two sat at their respective desks and worked the day away, planning for the

future of New Eden and its new inhabitants. After some time, a tall thin man appeared and asked to speak with Tegra-Duran.

"Sir, the Prime has been brought online again, as you requested. It is secure and waiting for your arrival."

"Perfect. I will be along shortly," Tegra-Duran replied as he turned to speak with Lonie. "I'm taking you with me. It's time you got to meet the Prime." The two traveled to the newly built detention center and passed through the high security areas to reach the cell containing the Prime.

"Are you well?" was the first question Tegra-Duran asked the Prime as Lonie stood close by. The Prime thought this an odd question, for it had no feelings from which to draw a conclusion. It could respond with only indifference.

"I am functioning correctly, if that's what you mean. When and where do I now exist?" the Prime asked.

"Do not worry, you and the other six Taskoids are safe. We have arrived on New Eden. This is Lonie, who works with me. I am now the prime minister, and it has been a little over two years since we last spoke," Tegra-Duran blurted, all in one breath.

"I see. And why have you reactivated me?" asked the Prime.

"Since our last meeting, a small group of us have been researching what you told me about the First Ones, and we think we have discovered a way to find them. We modified the communications device you retrieved from Earth and are ready to test it. It seemed prudent to revive you and the others to help with this process. Are you willing to work with us?" Tegra-Duran asked.

"Yes, that will be acceptable," the Prime responded.

"Good, then I leave you in the care of Lonie. She will be in charge of assisting you and the other Taskoids. I will meet you later at the facility we created, and I look forward to working with you," Tegra-Duran said.

Lonie was surprised and a little nervous with the responsibility. "You'll be fine, I trust you," Tegra-Duran said confidently, then left, leaving Lonie to face the Prime alone.

Later all gathered at the newly created facility and, in the center of a vast room surrounded by viewing windows, stood the Grays' communication device connected to computers the humans had built. Tegra-Duran was excited by the progress the team had made and anxious to test their creation.

The Prime and the six remaining Taskoids were in attendance and asked to be connected to the computing system. Tegra-Duran refused, still unsure of the Prime's motives.

The QEP drive system's dark energy cell was used to power the device as the team began cracking the space between the three dimensions which humans normally experienced and the fourth dimension where the First Ones existed. First appeared a sparking of light. The ground shook violently, and dust from the ceiling rained down on the gathered people. The room began to sparkle with light, but not from any definable place, though a strange glow emanated from the floor.

Several of the women with long hair noticed that it was lifting from their heads, as if static was permeating the room. Then, in the center of the room, a single light source near the communications device hung in the air just feet above the floor. Everyone started to back away from the multi-colored light. It became brighter and more intense and small bolts of lightning shot from it, giving the room an almost Tesla coil effect. A high-pitched whine began and several of the team members covered their ears. Some moved away from the viewing windows to the

back of the room. The room itself began to shimmer and fade.

Slowly another room appeared to form around them, and small humanoid figures came into view. This new room was dense with unrecognizable technology, and light filled it from unseen sources. Some of the humans were alarmed when the small figures materialized just inches from where they were. The two rooms began to merge. The vast room of the human team was still visible, though vague and hard to focus on, and the new humanoid room was equally vague and difficult to see. But the small occupants were sharp and clear. They were obviously the 'First Ones' recognized by the Prime.

"This is the same room we found in Dhuusamareeb, Somalia, back on old Earth," the Prime said. "It seems the First Ones do still inhabit that place."

The First Ones looked like the angels spoken of in legends, emanating a radiant light from their bodies, in particular a golden light resembling wings, reaching from their backs toward the sky.

"Fascinating!" Tegra-Duran said in awe. As soon as Tegra-Duran spoke, a First One reacted to his voice. Its mouth did not move, but everyone in the room heard a language they could understand.

"How do you speak our language?" it asked Tegra-Duran.

"I am not. I am speaking my own language," a shocked Tegra-Duran responded.

The Prime added, "It is as we suspected. That is part of the Grays' communication device's design. It acts as a translator for those that use it."

"What manner of being are you, that I understand your speech?" the First One queried the Prime.

The Prime asked Tegra-Duran if it could explain this to the First One, and Tegra-Duran relinquished authority to the Prime to proceed.

For the next hour and a half, the Prime relayed the history of humanity to the First Ones as the Taskoids had deciphered it. The First Ones listened intently. The Prime said that the First Ones were distant ancestors of the people they now faced, and the First Ones seemed pleased to learn of this. The Prime explained the Grays and their involvement with the First Ones and the beings agreed this to be true. Then the Prime explained the current condition of old Earth, encased in a layer of iron and slowly losing its orbit, perhaps eventually to be drawn into the sun.

This upset the First Ones greatly, for they relied on Earth's stability to maintain their existence. The Prime offered sanctuary on the planet they now inhabited, much to the alarm of Tegra-Duran, who immediately demanded a word in private with the Prime.

"What the hell are you doing!" snapped Tegra-Duran as he faced the Prime and looked hard into its 'face.'

"Let me explain, please," said the Prime.

"I will not let you randomly make decisions for the people of this planet. I trusted you to do the right thing here, that is why I had you restarted. Damn it, what have you done?" Tegra-Duran was beginning to come apart at the seams.

The other six Taskoids had begun to move about, nervous at the possibility the Prime might be in danger. Tegra-Duran lost it at the sight of the moving Taskoids and, pointing a finger at the Prime's face, snarled, "You damn well better call off the Taskoids or I promise you, I will destroy all of you here and now with the push of a button!" The six Taskoids immediately stopped moving and backed up.

The First Ones were puzzled by what was happening, but patiently waited.

"We will need their help," the Prime said.

"Help? Help with what?" Tegra-Duran growled.

"I cannot tell you right now, you just have to trust me." The Prime's voice seemed nervous, something the handheld communicator had never revealed before, but Tegra-Duran noticed it.

It was too late now anyway, Tegra-Duran realized. The Prime had already made the offer and he was obliged to act upon it. He returned to face the First Ones and said, "I am called Tegra-Duran. I am the prime minister, or leader, of my people. It is my great honor to welcome any of your kind we can help by offering sanctuary for you here."

"I am called Enoch, and I thank you for your kindness. This will not be forgotten."

"The one whom you spoke to is called the Prime. It is a creation of our ancestors and a guest on our world," Tegra-Duran said as he gave the Prime a sharp look.

Enoch felt it necessary to also introduce another First One, assuming that this old tradition was still respected among these distant descendants. "This is Enoch, and she is my mate."

"Wait, you're both named Enoch?" queried Tegra-Duran, a little confused.

"Yes, we are both Enoch, we are all Enoch," the First One replied.

"You're all Enoch? Then what do we call you?" asked Tegra-Duran, trying to understand.

The First One looked confused for a moment, then replied, "You may call us all Enoch. Is this not acceptable?"

Everyone was perplexed but swiftly Lonie responded, "It will make it easier to do a census." A moment of silence, then everyone started to giggle. This laughter pleased the First Ones, and they joined in.

Tegra-Duran was still deep in thought at what the Prime had said. *'We will need their help.'* For now, he had no answers, but he determined this would not go unresolved.



"The Taskoids had no way of knowing that, by using the god fragment on Charger R/T, we would create such a destructive force." The Prime was in Tegra-Duran's office, offering an explanation of what had happened on the planet of Betelle. "We truly thought Charger R/T was clinically dead. Using the god fragment on a dead thing just creates life, which is the same as the god mass does. It is a creator."

"I still do not understand the rationale you Taskoids use. You claim you wanted to spare human lives, but then you wipe ten thousand minds clean, leaving an obedient army at your disposal," Tegra-Duran said as he pushed his chair back from his desk.

"The Taskoids determined that in order to defeat the Grays' leader, we needed to sacrifice some humans. It was for the betterment of all." The Prime was showing that same nervous tone first detected by Tegra-Duran through the communicator.

"That decision was not yours to make. You should have spoken to Dayton," retorted Tegra-Duran.

The Prime's six legs splayed apart as a small hatch on its chest began to open. Two small arm-like appendages emerged, clutching the now complete god fragment which they had used on Charger R/T. It was black and spherical, about the size of a football, and had no weight, defying the concept of matter.

The Prime's face seemed to go dim for a moment as it stepped forward to offer the fragment to Tegra-Duran. "This is not the power of immortality. It is the same as the human concept of a god – a creator of life." The Prime's voice, amazingly, sounded a little sad through the communicator.

"Well, what do I do with it?" asked Tegra-Duran, confused by the whole affair. Another hatch opened, this time from the back of the Prime, and another appendage emerged, clutching a device completely alien from anything ever seen before. The Prime handed it to Tegra-Duran-Duran.

"What in the universe is this?" asked Tegra-Duran as he grasped the device. It appeared slippery, as if oiled, and was warm to the touch.

"This is from the Grays' explorer ship. The Grays designed it to find the god mass, like a range finder," the Prime explained.

"Okay, how does it work?" Tegra-Duran asked, as he rolled the slippery device in his hands.

"Basically, it changes color the closer you get to the god mass. Black means it is close, white means it is far away, and a variety of colors from the spectrum appear with varying distances," the Prime answered.

"So, it's black now because you handed me the god fragment, that tiny chunk of the mass?" Tegra-Duran was still trying to decipher what the Prime was implying.

"It is not detecting the fragment I gave you," the Prime answered.

"It's broken?" Tegra-Duran asked.

"No, it is working," The Prime responded.

"Okay then, I'm lost. What the hell are you saying?" Tegra-Duran's voice was betraying his impatience with the cryptic Prime.

"It is detecting a god sphere and showing that it is close by. It is not detecting the fragment I gave you, because that piece is too small to register."

"So?" Tegra-Duran asked.

"So, the god is coming here, and it is close!" The Prime continued. "The black sphere, which looks like a black hole in space to the ordinary eye, tore itself loose from the god mass in the center of the galaxy in pursuit of the explorer hominoids long ago. Now it has finally tracked down the missing fragment, and it is closing in on New Eden."

Tegra-Duran stood up and opened his mouth to speak, found he had no words and slumped back down into his chair.

Chapter 23 Revenge of the god

Endless meetings followed, with people debating the strange possibility of having to fight a god. History showed that whenever humanity had any interactions with what they perceived as a god, they always came up short. The prospect of now having to deal with the wrath of an angered god was overwhelming for a people who had fought so hard and sacrificed so much to survive, and who had thought their problems were over.

"I say we fight!" shouted a father who held his young daughter close in his arms. The meetings were turning into a chaotic yelling match of two factions. "What right does any god have to destroy my daughter? She has done nothing to hurt anyone!"

"She is not your daughter," shouted an older woman in the crowd. Tegra-Duran recognized her as one of Pennington's followers. "She belongs to god, as we all do. He is the divine creator, and he has the right to destroy all of us for our sins."

Yes, that old word, sin, had been resurrected again. Thanks to the history of old Earth now being taught in schools and colleges, an awareness of religion had once again been implanted in the minds of humanity. And once again, some people felt the desire to assume the mantle of righteous indignation, as religious leaders promised to guide the masses to salvation. Panic gripped communities all over New Eden, and many turned to these leaders for spiritual help.

"What kind of loving god would be willing to destroy all of us for something somebody did a million years ago?" demanded the angry father. "These stories you've resurrected make it sound like that's the reason old Earth was destroyed. It's all just foolish nonsense!" The father's anger was getting out of control and others were trying to settle him down.

Tegra-Duran attempted to restore order by speaking, but he was again cut off by the old woman who had spoken before. "It's not foolish to believe that the god will be merciful. If we are to be destroyed, only the true believers will be reborn to live forever at god's side in heaven," she said.

The father was now waving his fists and shouting. "That's your reward? You'll spend eternity worshipping at god's side? Do you have any idea what eternity means? You want to spend every second of every minute of every day for as long as time exists telling god how great it is?"

Now more people tried to contain this man, and to remove him from the meeting. "You are all mad! Why did we fight so long and lose so many lives if now you're all just going to roll over and accept death?"

"It's not death, dear," the old woman said gently. "It's life eternal and we will be young forever."

As the father was being forced from the meeting room, he yelled one last time. "You old cow, you've lived your life, and it's been long. My daughter is five, she's had only five years, five..."

"Please everyone, settle down," Tegra-Duran said, finally regaining the attention of the crowd. The meeting was being broadcast all over the planet. "We cannot allow personal views to hijack the purpose of these meetings. We have no idea if this god is even coming here in our lifetime. We must always recognize reality. Only logic and compassion will determine the right course of action. As I suggested during our last town hall meeting, we still have the Grays' QEP drive system in place on our moon. If need be, we can transport all the women and children there for safety until this is resolved."

"We cannot escape the judgment of god," the old woman interjected.

"Okay, that's enough! Please remove her, too," snapped Tegra-Duran. "This meeting is about the survival of humanity based on the information the Taskoids' Prime has supplied. We need to focus, people. Our lives depend on it!" Tegra-Duran was desperate now to keep control of the situation, and the injection of random ideologies was not helping.

Tegra-Duran voiced his frustration. "The people of old Earth were driven by emotions, particularly fear and panic, when faced with things they didn't understand. Like the lemmings, they would run headlong off a cliff if some fanatic said salvation was in that direction."

The Prime, who was sitting just down the table from Tegra-Duran, tried to add to the conversation through a Taskoid interpreter. "Our technology is vast. We have the powers of Mahoud and the Taskoids, and the advancements of humanity, combined with the remnants of the Grays' technology to cope with what's ahead."

"That is true," said Tegra-Duran, trying to sound official, as the Prime pressed on.

"With the activation of the Grays' communication device we also have our friends, the First Ones. We provided sanctuary for the Enoch, and they have agreed to help us in the defense of New Eden, should it come to that." Behind the Prime, a First One materialized from empty space, causing everyone there to fall silent in awe at its magnificence. It truly looked like an angel of legend.

"We, the Enoch, have pledged to help our distant brothers and sisters. Your offer of sanctuary has shown us that you are a worthy people to help."

The silence was full of awe.

"I wish I had that kind of power," chuckled Tegra-Duran. "Look, we have a bold plan, and we think it logical to assume that this god can be made to see reason. We can safely transport the old and the young to safety on our moon, and by presenting a sizeable force to resist god, show that we are a reasonable people who want to survive. We will simply explain that our ancestors took the god fragment, under the influence of the Grays, and we will offer to return it." Some at the meeting thought this reasonable, others mumbled at the foolishness of trying to resist god.

The meetings continued daily for the better part of a year, and still there was no sign of the vengeful god. In communities across New Eden, many people gathered to worship the god of history. A very small minority became fanatical and, feeling morally superior to the logical majority, decided to start communities of their own.

This was unacceptable to Tegra-Duran, who made it abundantly clear that he and the elders would never allow any group to receive special treatment denied to the vast majority. "We are all in this together. If you want to go live in a cave someplace, that is your right. Just don't ask us to support you."

One group of twenty people took Tegra-Duran up on this offer and moved to caves high up in the hills. Tegra-Duran was delighted; he was tired of hearing their complaints. They lasted only a few months before they gave up and returned to their homes. Dirt floors and cold drafts, mixed with wet rains and biting insects made life in the caves unbearable. They were lost without technology and miserable with the lack of heat, clean food, and water. Tegra-Duran often shook his head and smiled to himself over these fools.

As time passed, the meetings became less crowded as people felt more confident in the preparations that were being made. And there was still no appearance of any god.



Two years passed. Then, one day, the clouds turned a deep sickening green and winds across the planet of New Eden picked up to hurricane speed. The waters on the planet began to froth and churn, and waves smashed against the shores. The air became thick with fine dust particles and was difficult to breathe. Bolts of lightning ran rampant across the surface of the planet, sparking fires and striking people and animals looking for shelter. In the mountains, fierce snow squalls erupted from a clear blue sky, sending the temperature plummeting to bone-chilling levels. In other places, volcanic vents erupted, sending rivers of hot lava coursing through towns and villages. Finally, the ground itself responded. The heaving and shaking toppled buildings and knocked people off their feet, sending waves of panic everywhere.

"MY CHILDREN, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN OUR COVENANT?" boomed a voice which echoed in all directions but seemed to come from no specific location.

The god had arrived.

The clouds parted to reveal a huge black sphere in the sky. Its oily surface reflected light from the red dwarf sun, giving the impression that the black object emitted its own light. It spoke again with a voice like the blaring of trumpets.

"I AM YOUR FATHER ON HIGH, AND YOUR WICKEDNESS HAS BROUGHT UPON YOU MY RAGE!"

Many voices were now shouting, caught off guard with this being's arrival, some in rage, some begging forgiveness, but none seemed to catch the god's attention.

Tegra-Duran, with the help of the Prime, had prepared for this day. They rushed to the top of the prime minister's office building and, from the roof, started up the Grays' communication device. Tegra-Duran had had a speech prepared. The Grays' device began broadcasting at full volume on every channel known. "I am known as Tegra-Duran, the prime minister of this planet, and we have been expecting you. Can we talk?"

The black sphere was silent, as if it had never expected to hear a response and needed time to comprehend what was happening. The people of New Eden fell silent, all watching the monitors and waiting for a response.

"WHO DARES SPEAK TO YOUR FATHER ON HIGH AS IF YOU WERE EQUAL?"

"Forgive me, sir, I do not mean to offend. I am seeking a dialogue with you," Tegra-Duran responded, both puzzled and curious. He had been heard, which was a bit unexpected, for they had had little hope this would even work.

"YOU HAVE TAKEN WHAT IS NOT YOURS TO TAKE; YOU HAVE BEEN WHERE YOU WERE NOT MEANT TO BE. YOU HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOUR CREATOR AND MUST BE PUNISHED!" roared the voice.

"Please allow me to explain," Tegra-Duran began, but in vain. He had hoped to describe the circumstances of the situation and offer to return the god fragment, but the black sphere had stopped listening.

"I WILL CAST DOWN UPON YOU SEVEN PLAGUES. THE BURDEN OF THE FOUR RIDERS OF DEATH BE UPON THE HEADS OF ALL. YOU WILL HAVE FORTY DAYS AND NIGHTS OF TORMENT BEFORE I WASH CLEAN THIS WORLD AND BEGIN AGAIN. BLESSED BE THE SINNERS WHO REPENT FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MY BLESSING. YOUR MERCIFUL FATHER ON HIGH HAS SPOKEN. NOW HEED MY WRATH!"

Tegra-Duran tried speaking again, but the effort was pointless. The black sphere retreated from the clouds and the violence on New Eden continued. The choice was now up to the people. They could fight, they could die, or they could attempt to do one thing so unexpected that some

thought it too inconceivable to contemplate.

Tegra-Duran and the Prime stood in the office of the prime minister as chaos raged outside the windows. Using the communication device, they called the Enoch. The room began to calm as the two planes of existence converged and several Enoch appeared.

Tegra-Duran took a long breath and began to speak to the Enoch. "It is as I feared; we can have no dialogue with this god being. It is bent on first destroying and then recreating life again on our world. We have fought too long and hard to survive as a species to give in now. Most of us feel this god has no right to take our lives from us because of the mistakes of the past."

Tegra-Duran continued, with heavy heart. "The people are in full agreement with my sentiments, save for a few radicals. But we cannot fight something as powerful as a god and hope to survive. We cannot convince the entire planet to support this endeavor and I can't take the responsibility of ending the lives of people who have no wish to fight." His face was sad. "We now realize that the god facing us is determined to destroy us and we are too weak to survive."

Tegra-Duran knew what he must ask, but the consequences of this action would burn a scar of torment and grief on his heart that he would carry for all his life. "We intend to use the time-lock device on the god. This will trap it forever, we hope. The problem is that we will be trapping the god on the same plane as Charger R/T, for we have only the one device. To add to our problems, we have no way to get the god close enough to the device to activate it." He took a deep breath. "Unless you help."

There was a long pause as the people gathered stood in silence.

"We have existed a long time and seen many things. We have watched you grow, watched you learn, love, and die. We have seen the best of humanity and the worst of humanity, and we have sat in silence for too long," one of the Enoch responded. "You offered us sanctuary when we required it. That kindness from our descendants can never be bettered."

The Enoch reached out a hand and placed it on Tegra-Duran's shoulder. There was an actual contact and, for a brief second, Tegra-Duran felt the touch of an angel, something no one expected could happen. "We, your forbears, will help you, but we require a sacrifice from someone that may not be willing to help." The Enoch turned its gaze to the Prime and spoke directly to it. "Will you help the children of old Earth? You are one of their greatest creations, and we cannot do this thing they ask without your help."

What was being asked of the Prime was to sacrifice its existence, for it alone could withstand the cold vacuum of space, and thus it alone had the ability to trip the button to trap the god in the time-lock. And it would also be trapped forever in the time-lock with the raging chaos of Charger R/T and the god at each other's throats.

The god would spend an eternity trying to destroy a living being, then recreate it, for the god was a creator. However, Charger R/T was considered dead, and what is already dead cannot be killed again. In addition, Charger R/T now had the powers of a god himself.

The Enoch would also be trapped forever, and it would take every last Enoch to complete this task.

How would the Prime react? It was a simple, yet complex being, and had once been broken and shattered, yet now thought and acted as a human might, and owed its very existence to these creator humans.

After some time, the Prime responded. "I will help."

The plan was settled. The two planes of existence merged back into that of New Eden.



The violence on the planet had heightened while Tegra-Duran was on the Enochs' plane of existence, and people were beginning to die in large numbers, caught up in the chaos and turmoil of the god's wrath. To the shock of the people of New Eden, hundreds of thousands of Enoch appeared, rising from the ground, so it seemed, as ethereal spirits of light ascending into the skies.

Tegra-Duran rushed to the landing pad of a space craft built by the Taskoids with the Prime clicking along on its six limbs just behind. As the Prime prepared to board the small craft with the precious time-lock device already loaded, Tegra-Duran said, "You asked me to trust you once. I'm glad I did. I can never thank you enough, my friend." Tegra-Duran gently touched the Prime's cold, metallic body. The touch meant nothing to the Prime, but the thought did.

Within minutes the small Tasker craft lifted from the surface to join the Enoch now engaged in battling the god sphere, trying to prevent any further damage to New Eden and its people. The god swept away advancing Enoch by the hundreds as they attacked relentlessly, while the Tasker ship drew ever closer.

In the sky wicked flashes of light radiated outward in every direction. It was true that not even light could escape from this black hole of a sphere. The Enoch were pulled into its inky black surface, never to escape. The battle reached its zenith as every remaining Enoch attacked the black sphere simultaneously, leaving a small window of opportunity for the Prime to slip out of the small ship and drift silently toward the god, with the time-lock device in tow. The Prime moved ever closer. It stopped moving when the god caught sight of the brave little Taskoid.

Such deceit infuriated the god as it turned its full wrath on the Prime, a tiny speck in comparison to the black sphere, and tried to find a way to kill it. The Enoch which Tegra-Duran had spoken to, in a momentous sacrifice, diverted the full attention of the god from the Prime. This allowed the Prime time to turn on a small thruster pack, pushing it close enough to activate the time-lock device.

Great chaos exploded in the skies above New Eden. The god was fading in and out of existence as it tried to resist the time-lock. For a brief but very significant moment, the activation of the time-lock brought Charger R/T back into the current time stream to face the raging god. Without hesitation, Charger R/T immediately turned the hell of his fury on the god, ensuring its doom.

As quickly as the battle had begun, the task was complete. The god was gone. Charger R/T was gone. So was the Prime.

The skies cleared and the world was soothed. The people of New Eden cheered as the small time-lock device fell back to earth, landing hard but remaining intact. It took a few days for the magnitude of what the people of New Eden had done to finally register. They had rejected the god, trapping it forever with a demon full of tremendous hatred. Charger R/T and the god sphere would spend forever at each other's throats, each trying to put an end to the other.

Tegra-Duran had a great statue built in the center of the capital city, marking the occasion for everyone to remember and, deep beneath its foundation, the time-lock device was secured and buried.



DART SPEAKS TO READER:

Did everyone live happily ever after? Reader, you understand humanity well enough to

know that isn't likely to happen! Still, life on New Eden continued peacefully for a very long time.

No, that wasn't the end of the story. After all, this is the year 4800, and the battle between the black sphere, Charger R/T, the Enoch, and the Prime happened in 2640.

What happened to the god fragment that the Prime gave Tegra-Duran? Tegra-Duran thought it was too dangerous to keep on New Eden or its moon, so he sent it out with the next exploration spaceship, and it was released into black space. Since it was weightless, gravity wouldn't affect it, so it may be drifting there still. Or it may have found its way back to the black mass at the center of the galaxy.

Yes, you do need to know the rest of the history. You'll be happy to know that your hero, Charger R/T, will be part of it. But you must listen carefully, and I must speak quickly, because the forces of evil are closing in on us. Charger R/T says it may only be another day or three.

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TIMELINE Book 1

- 66 MYA Gray aliens explore Earth, cause dinosaur extinction
- 65 MYA Grays return, develop intelligent Dinosauroids
- 1.5 MYA Grays create intelligent humans
- 1 MYA The human First Ones build three great cities underground.
- 12,000 BCE The human Mahouds find a new home, Alcazaba.
- 2250 BCE Tasker robot from Mahoud explores Earth
- 1700 CE The Grays' spaceship captures a god fragment
- 2025 CE USS Rothschild sent to planet Crest.
- 2030-33 CE The Mahoud-Earth war. Charger the Hyborg created.
- 2040 CE Discovery of First Ones' city below Stonehenge.
- 2050 CE Dinosauroids merge their timeline again with Earth.
- 2055 CE Maven kids steal a spaceship and head for New Eden.

TIMELINE Book 2

- 2100 CE The Tasker War on New Eden.
- 2205 CE First Gray attack on Crest.
- 2255 CE Grays inflict Night of the Black Rain on Earth.
- 2256 CE Charger creates new humans on Neo Terra.
- 2315 CE Spaceship Loki lands on Crest, then is lost in space.
- 2365 CE Deleray sees Charger burn up under a tree.
- 2623 CE God fragment found, Charger R/T created.
- 2635 CE The Grays have imploded. There is no war.
- 2640 CE Charger and the god are captured in a time-lock.

GLOSSARY

1. Real world terms and definitions.

antigravity the antithesis of gravity; a hypothetical force by which a body of positive mass would repel a body of negative mass

Antikythera Mechanism 2,000-year-old astronomical calculator built by ancient Greeks

antimatter matter's twin, but with an opposite electric charge. When matter and antimatter meet, they annihilate each other, leaving nothing but energy behind. The big bang created equal amounts of the two, but today the observable universe is composed almost entirely of ordinary matter. This asymmetry is one of the greatest unsolved problems in physics. Antimatter is not the same as dark matter (see below).

Area 51 The US Air Force facility commonly known as Area 51 is a remote detachment of Edwards Air Force Base, within the Nevada Test and Training Range. The intense secrecy surrounding the base has made it the frequent subject of conspiracy theories and a central component to unidentified flying object (UFO) folklore.

BCE Before the Common Era. Now used in place of BC (Before Christ)

binary language the digital representation of speech

black hole a geometrically defined region of space-time exhibiting such strong gravitational effects that nothing—including particles and electromagnetic radiation such as light—can escape from inside it

bunker buster a bomb designed to penetrate targets buried deep underground

CE Common Era. Now used in place of AD ("Anno Domini" in Latin, or "the year of the Lord" in English)

cryo a combining form meaning "icy cold"

cyborg A cyborg (cybernetic organism) has both organic and biomechatronic parts. The term cyborg is often applied to an organism that has restored function or enhanced abilities due to the integration of some artificial component or technology that relies on some sort of feedback.

dark matter a mysterious substance; its gravitational pull seems to hold galaxies together, like a massive skeleton, but we can't see it. We only know it's there from calculations of the speed at which galaxies move. The matter we know and understand accounts for just four per cent of the known universe; the rest is dark matter and dark energy.

Dhuusamareeb Dhusamareb in English, also spelled Dhusa Mareb, is the capital of the central Galguduud region of Somalia. It serves as the center of the Dhusamareb District.

dimensions classical physics describes the first three basic dimensions as up/down, left/right, and forward/backward.

Enola Gay the Boeing B-29 Superfortress bomber which dropped the first atomic bomb.

FEMA Federal Emergency Management Agency.

fourth dimension The fourth dimension is time, which is not spatial, but a way of measuring physical change. We cannot move freely in time but must subjectively move in one direction.

Gobekli Tepe An archaeological site, regarded as of great importance, at the top of a mountain ridge in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey.

Goldilocks zone Also called the habitable zone or life zone, the Goldilocks region is an area of space in which a planet is just the right distance from its home star so that its surface is neither too hot nor too cold and liquid water remains on the surface of the planet without freezing or evaporating out into space.

hertz The hertz is defined as one cycle per second. One of its most common uses is the description of the sine wave, particularly those used in radio and audio applications, such as the frequency of musical tones. The unit is named for Heinrich Rudolf Hertz, who was the first to conclusively prove the existence of electromagnetic waves.

Higgs boson field (nicknamed the 'god particle') an invisible force field that stretches across the universe, encasing us like a Jell-O mold, and giving mass to elementary particles within it: the stuff that makes up stars, planets, trees, buildings, animals, and all of us. Without mass, electrons, protons, and neutrons wouldn't stick together to make atoms; atoms wouldn't make molecules; neither we nor our planet would exist.

hominid any of the modern or extinct bipedal primates of the family Hominidae. Used in the text as a term for naturally evolving humans.

hominoid same as above, but used in the text to refer to human lines altered by the alien Grays.

Kuiper Belt a disc-shaped region of icy objects beyond the orbit of Neptune -- billions of kilometers from our sun. The Kuiper Belt and even more distant Oort Cloud are believed to be the home of comets that orbit our sun. The known icy worlds and comets in both regions are much smaller than Earth's moon.

LSD Lysergic acid diethylamide (acid) is a psychedelic drug, known for its psychological effects, which can include altered thinking processes, closed- and open-eye visuals, synesthesia, an altered sense of time and spiritual experiences. First synthesized from a chemical in ergot, a grain fungus that typically grows on rye.

Lycan A werewolf, also known as a lycanthrope (from the Greek) is a mythological or folkloric

human with the ability to shapeshift into a wolf or hybrid wolf-like creature, either purposely or after being placed under a curse or affliction (e.g., via a bite or scratch from another werewolf).

MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology

nanoparticles particles between 1 and 100 nanometers in size. Nanoparticle research is currently an area of intense scientific interest due to a wide variety of potential applications in biomedical, optical, and electronic fields.

plasma one of the four fundamental states of matter, the others being solid, liquid, and gas. A plasma is an ionized gas, a gas into which sufficient energy is provided to free electrons from atoms or molecules and to allow both species, ions, and electrons, to coexist. In industry, plasma torches are used to cut metals.

quantum entanglement In quantum physics, entangled particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances. The phenomenon so riled Albert Einstein that he called it "spooky action at a distance."

redshift In physics, redshift happens when light or other electromagnetic radiation from an object is increased in wavelength, or shifted to the red end of the spectrum.

R/T the performance marker used on Dodge automobiles since the 1960s. R/T stands for Road/Track. (See below for the definition used in the book.)

Shillelagh This particular type of alien fighting machine was named after the Ford MGM-51 Shillelagh, an American anti-tank guided missile designed to be launched from a conventional gun.

star-in-a-jar Nuclear fusion is nature's atomic power - it is what powers the sun and, if it can be made to happen on Earth on a large enough scale, promises to solve all of mankind's energy problems. It would be clean, last forever and create no long-term nuclear waste. One experimenter claims to have achieved it using simple sound waves. Sonoluminescence is a process that transforms sound waves into flashes of light, focusing the sound energy into a tiny flickering hot spot inside a bubble. This star-in-a-jar effortlessly reaches temperatures of tens of thousands of degrees, hotter than the surface of the sun.

supersymmetry In particle physics, supersymmetry is a proposed type of space-time symmetry that relates two basic classes of elementary particles: bosons, which have an integer-valued spin, and fermions, which have a half-integer spin.

telematics the branch of information technology that deals with the long-distance transmission of computerized information.

telomeres an essential part of human cells that affect how our cells age. Telomeres are the caps at the end of each strand of DNA that protect our chromosomes, like the plastic tips at the end of shoelaces.

Tesla coil a form of induction coil for producing high-frequency alternating currents.

Titan the largest moon of Saturn. Thought to be a prebiotic environment rich in complex organic chemistry with a possible subsurface liquid ocean serving as a biotic environment.

Toba The Toba eruption occurred in Indonesia about 71,000 BCE. Its erupted mass was 100 times greater than the largest volcanic eruption in recent history. The eruption deposited an ash layer over all South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian and South China Seas and may have caused a global volcanic winter of 6–10 years and a 1,000-year-long cooling episode.

Ununseptium a super-heavy artificial chemical element with temporary symbol Uus and atomic number 117. It is the second-heaviest of all the elements that have been created so far and is the second-to-last element of the 7th period of the periodic table.

Wankel engine a type of internal combustion engine using an eccentric rotary design to convert pressure into rotating motion. Over the commonly used reciprocating piston designs the Wankel engine delivers advantages of: simplicity, smoothness, compactness, high revolutions per minute and a high power to weight ratio.

Wendigo a half-beast creature appearing in the legends of the Algonquian peoples along the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes Region of both the United States and Canada.

Woodhenge a Neolithic henge and timber circle monument located in the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, 2 miles north-east of Stonehenge and just north of Amesbury.

2. Terms coined specifically for this book

blink system a technological triumph, it required a massive system of orbital satellites, quantum computers and devices surgically attached to every human around the globe. Each device was numbered and cataloged, then integrated into a global network of systems and subsystems which any individual could access virtually. This allowed a traveler to pick a destination and activate the transport, or the blink, which would remove him from his present location, then reassemble him instantly, molecule by molecule at the desired destination. Similar in a way to the 20th century telephone system. One could call up the address where one wished to go, then be deconstructed, and reconstituted all in a blink.

Dinosauroids Troodon dinosaurs developed by the alien Grays into super-intelligent creatures meant to be servants

fifth dimension consists of the three dimensions all humans experience, plus time and space, coupled with an elevation to a higher plane of existence. A being in a fifth dimension could observe and interact with a being of the third or fourth, but the reverse is impossible. A quantifiable plane of existence where the observer experiences all the dimensions simultaneously, as if they are one.

First Ones a small group of humans were selected by the alien Grays for development into super-intelligent beings suitable as servants, called humanoids. Some of these escaped, developed a great empire and evolved into the Age of Energy, where they discarded their physical bodies and became known as Enoch.

Hyborg a combination of hybrid and cyborg, applied to physically and mentally altered soldiers

Mahouds a branch of the First Ones which went off on their own and settled Atlantis

Mavens the name given to bright students whose DNA is manipulated in order to create highly intelligent experts in particular fields, who would quickly find new ways to reclaim the planet after the Mahoud-Earth war.

Megiddo max Megiddo maximum security prison

R/T Resurrected terminus, or living dead

Taskers a class of robots built by the Mahouds

Taskoids Tasker robots which acquired the ability to make decisions

time-lock created by the alien Grays, this device isolates matter and energy from the normal flow of time

Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

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## **Books Edited by Lea Tassie**

Charger the Soldier  
Charger the Weapon  
Charger the God  
The Missing Year

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About this book

Many years after the Mahoud war, Charger reflects on his bizarre life, a simple mechanic who became a vampire with werewolf allies, fighting aliens from a distant solar system. It's such B-movie material! Humanity created him because they needed a monster and he's still protecting them. He does what they cannot, yet they fear and despise him for it.

A war on New Eden puts Charger back on the front line, but victory brings the bitter irony of learning that the Taskers are humans in bio-mechanical bodies. Then the ruthless alien Grays attack with the Night of the Black Rain, intending to destroy all humanity. Charger takes on the seemingly hopeless task of saving humanity once again.

He welcomes death, but the serene oblivion doesn't last. The Prime Tasker resurrects Charger to wage yet another war and unintentionally recreates him with the powers of a god. A very angry god. The results are disastrous.

The final threat to mankind's survival is a sentient, massive black sphere intent on revenge. Will Charger consent to save humanity again?